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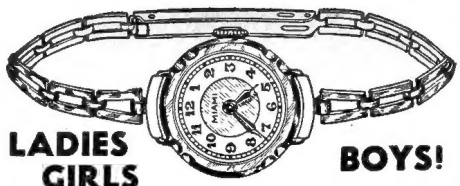

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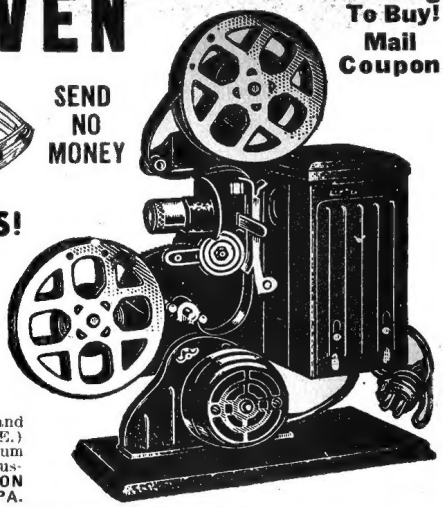

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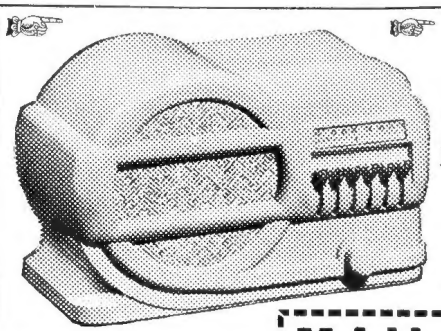

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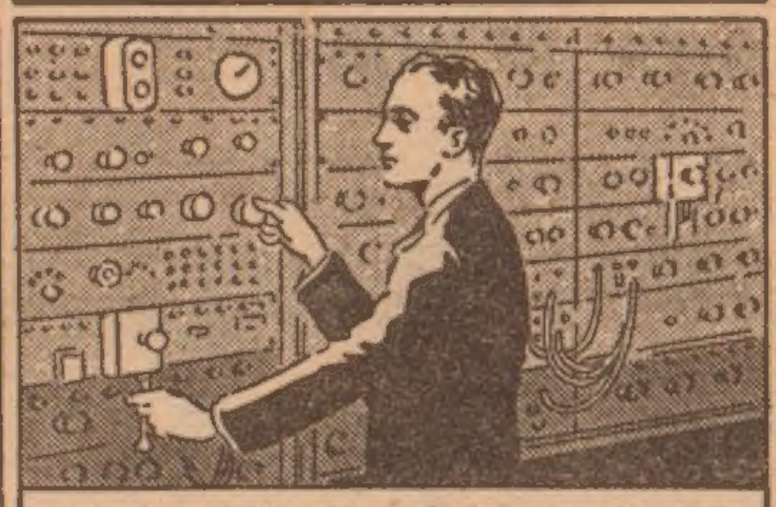

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MAY ISSUE ON SALE MARCH 8

HORROR STORIES

Volume Nine · March, 1940 · Number Three

A LONG NOVEL OF MYSTERY AND TERROR

Welcome, Brothers, to Hell! ..... ***Wayne Rogers*** **6**
No one in that gay crowd could foresee the horror presaged by the nude girl whose dance of passion and death led the parade. . . . Only Buck Sheridan knew that all of Albany's fairest young girls were doomed to the same ghastly fate—and he could do nothing!

FOUR NOVELETTES OF BLOOD-CHILLING HORROR

House of the Mad Butcher ..... ***Russell Gray*** **30**
There was madness in our blood—a hideous perverted madness that turned the men of our family into raging beasts who brutally murdered the women they loved! And the moment I met Lydia I felt the same evil madness stirring in my veins!

Flesh for the Goat-Man ..... ***Donald Dale*** **48**
It was with glowing hearts and eyes that Virginia Emptage and Bruce Shanlon looked down upon the peaceful little sanitorium they had both helped to make a success. And they laughed together at the old legends that told of the time when the Goat-Man would come out from the hills to ravish and destroy those whom he had marked with his ghastly halo of fire. . . . They laughed—until it happened!

I Am the Tiger Girl! ..... ***Gabriel Wilson*** **66**
Must I be forever doomed to wander alone, shunned by my friends, feared by those I love? No longer can I control the fierce power that lives in my hands—that forces my claw-like nails to dig into human flesh, and to rend and tear in a mad ecstasy of passion!

Mistress of the Blood-Drinkers ..... ***Ralston Shields*** **88**
Roger Coleman was happy—until the day he met the lovely and incredibly evil Naida Sadko. From then on he existed only as her slave, an abject shell of a man who lived solely that she might live, too . . . that she might feed upon his living flesh and blood!

TRUE FEATURE OF WEIRD HORROR

Caravan of Incredible Crime ..... ***Charles Boswell*** **79**
The Body Merchants . . . men whose warped minds conceived and executed the most ghastly series of crimes in the annals of history!

—AND—

Death in the Darkness ..... ***The Editors*** **3**
The horrors of war are not always at the front lines. . . .

Chamber of Horrors ..... **A Department** **65**
A glimpse at the editors' mail bag. . . .

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DEATH IN THE DARKNESS

THIS evening we stayed in our office until long after darkness had fallen. We turned on every light in the place and let their brilliance shine forth unrestricted into the night air. Then we looked out the window over the city with its billions of similar lights reflecting a great glow in the sky—and we thought, "Thank God, we still can do this!"

We were remembering the story told us earlier in the day by a man who had but recently returned from war-ravaged Europe. . . .

It was in Berlin—he had said—shortly after England and France had declared war on Germany. The nightly black-out was in full force, and finding one's way about after dusk had fallen was something of a problem, especially to one as unfamiliar with the city as I was. Therefore it was with great relief and joy that, the second evening after my arrival, I encountered a friend. She was a German girl whom I had met while she had been visiting relatives in the United States—an extremely lovely and entirely delightful young woman of twenty-odd.

We came across each other entirely by accident in a smoke-filled and vilely lighted cafe. We had one or two drinks together, and then she said she would show me the night life of a blacked-out city. I asked her if she were not afraid of an attack or a hold-up in the impenetrable darkness of the streets, but she poohpoohed the idea. The argument continued for a while, and, eventually I was shamed into agreeing to her proposal.

We left the cafe—and never have I experienced as bleak and forsaken a feeling as I did then. I could sense life about

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me—a few people hurrying past, sometimes bumping into us with a muttered curse or apology; an occasional car or bus slowly feeling its way down the street, its shaded headlights all but invisible beyond a distance of a few feet—but it all seemed fantastic and entirely unbelievable. I felt that I was in a vast wilderness, alone except for the frail girl to whose arm I held so firmly, and that wild beasts of prey surrounded us on every side. We did have lighted cigarettes in our hands, but if you've ever tried to find your way down a lonely country road at night with only the aid of a cigarette, you can understand how much aid that is. If anything, its glowing tip increases the sense of encircling desolation.

For perhaps fifteen minutes we walked along, stumbling over curbings, bumping into corners of buildings. Several times I was saved from falling only by the alertness of my charming guide, who seemed to have a sixth sense for this kind of travel. Suddenly I became conscious that we were encountering fewer and fewer fellow walkers and that for some time past, not a single car had passed us on the street.

I inquired as to the reason for this. "Oh, most people stick to the main streets," she laughed. "We're going to—" She mentioned the name of a cafe, located in a district of the city that even I knew had a not-too-savory reputation. "We're almost there now, so don't scold me."

I wasn't going to scold her—I was going to demand that we turn back immediately, but as I turned my head to speak, I smashed into something bulky and soft. It was a man and he cursed loudly and fluently. I lighted a match to see if any damage had been done, and in the sudden flare I could see that his eyes were fixed with glittering, beast-like intensity upon my companion. He was drunk, but I had the immediate conviction

that there was something innately evil about him—something more than mere alcoholism.

The match went out and sudden darkness rushed over us again, more intense, more fearful than before. I was completely blinded. I muttered something that could pass for an apology and reached for the girl's arm, which I had released to light the match. I grasped only emptiness!

And at the same moment I heard a choked scream beside me, the muffled sound of a fist striking flesh, and then quick, running footsteps. I grabbed out again, wildly, flailing my arms, but my hands encountered nothing more solid than the night air. The man had slipped away as silently as a ghost—and he had carried the girl with him!

Frantically I fumbled for another match, but by the time I found one and lighted it, there was nothing to be seen. I was standing alone in a tiny circle of flickering light, and all around me was an impenetrable blanket of darkness. I was completely helpless. I could not even guess in which direction they had gone. . . .

I will not describe the rest of the night. My memory of it is hazy even now. Somehow, I managed to summon the police; but they could do no more than I until daylight came. Eventually someone brought me back to my hotel and I fell into an exhausted slumber.

It was late the next morning before they found her—dead, strangled, her once-lovely body cruelly bruised and beaten. She, for whom the black-out had held no terrors! . . .

* * *

The man who told us this pitiful and tragic story is a former war-correspondent. He was completely broken by the experience, though he had been long inured to the usual horrors of war, and returned home as soon as possible, vowing never again to spend a night away from the bright lights of peace. . . . We wonder if any of our readers have ever undergone an experience as horrible as this? It would be interesting to know. . . .

THE EDITORS

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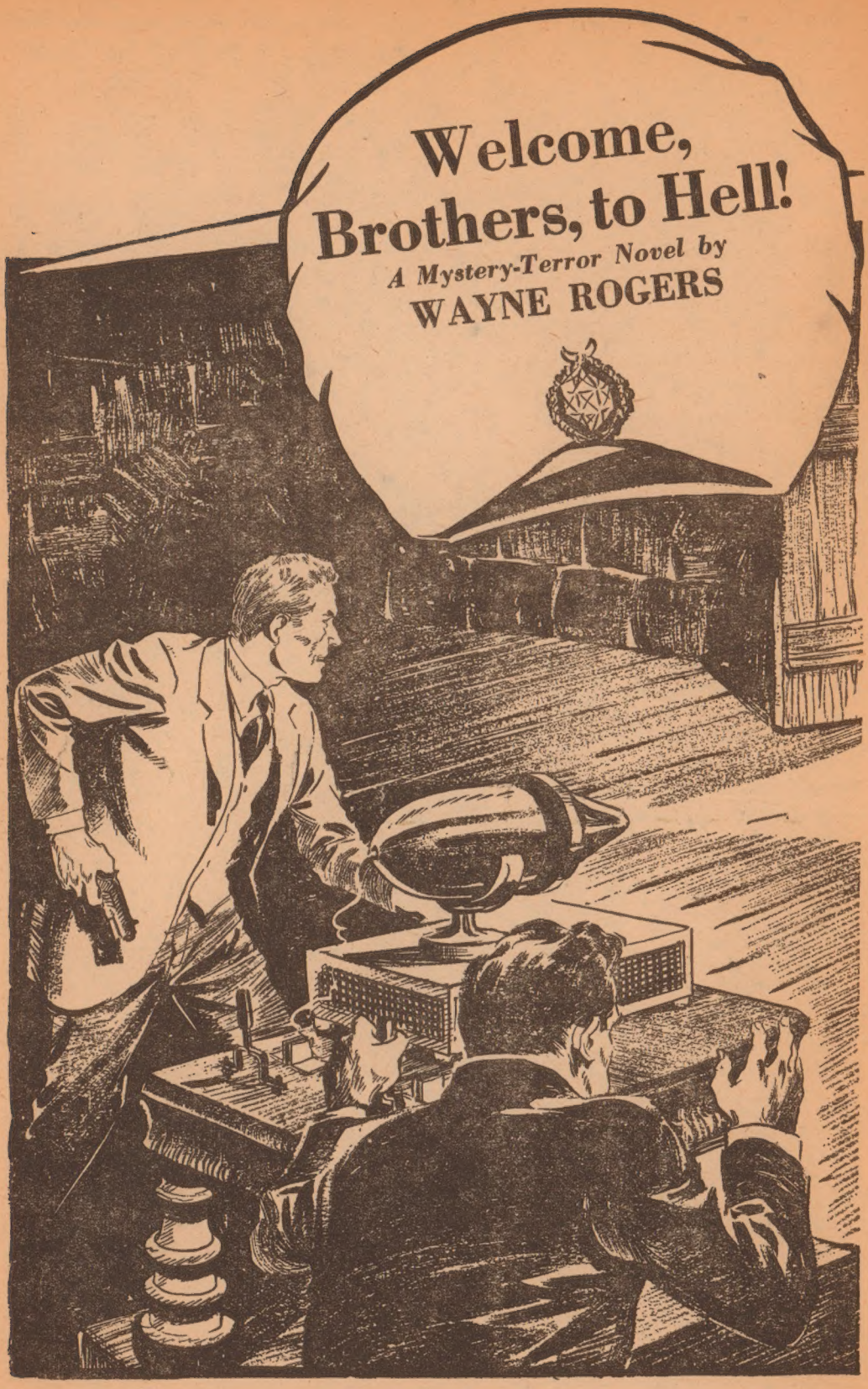

Welcome,
Brothers, to Hell!
A Mystery-Terror Novel by
WAYNE ROGERS

The mad carnival spirit ruled supreme—save in the hearts of those few who knew the ghastly fate awaiting those lovely debutantes whose dance of passion and death was to begin at the nod of a madman's head!

CHAPTER ONE

Death Marches In

BUCK SHERIDAN grinned as he approached the Union Depot, and so did hundreds of spectators who lined the curbs near the station. The Nobles of the Veiled Oracle had already taken possession of Albany—and three days of the Oraclers' convention meant

three days of madcap pranks and hilarious celebration. Already nearly every man on the street seemed to be wearing one of the pyramid-decorated badges of the order, and the Oraclers' colorful turbans had become a familiar sight.

On the afternoon of the first day of the convention most of the visiting delegations were already in town. Others were arriving steadily from all directions. That was Kawar Oasis, from Amsterdam, lining up in front of the station; Sheridan recognized their outlandish costumes as the bandsmen took their places at the head of the marchers. They were laughing and calling greetings to friends in the sidewalk crowds—but there was some delay, some apparent miscue that kept them standing there with their instruments ready to be raised to their lips.

Sheridan had almost reached them when he discovered what was causing the delay. The drum majorette was late. Everything was in readiness, waiting for the leader—and then she arrived. A car drew up at the side of the station, and out stepped a pretty young woman, clad in knee-length white boots, a towering white shako and a richly embroidered white cape that reached below the boot tops.

The Kawar nobles sent up a cheer to greet her, but she hardly seemed to notice them. With only the barest wisp of a smile on her curving lips, she strode to her position at the head of the band and raised her ornate baton. The gleaming silver ball that topped it sparkled in the sunlight. Smartly it came down, and the musicians broke into the weird minor strains of "Desert Dawn," the Oraclers' marching song.

For an instant the leader hesitated—and something about the strange, mask-like expression on her face gripped Sheridan's attention. Then, her head proudly erect, she started forward, with bare knees poking out from beneath her robe as she high-stepped in front of the band.

A wave of cheers and applause greeted Kawar as they marched down the street—but suddenly the cheering faltered uncertainly. A gasp of shocked surprise came from the crowd as every eye was riveted on the prancing drum majorette. Her left hand had been working at the frogs that held her cape, opening one after the other, until she reached the one at her throat. It came apart, and the cape slipped down from her bare shoulders, dropped away from her unclad form.

Stark naked she marched at the head of her band!

For a moment Sheridan was spellbound, gaping like the others at her lovely nude figure. The dazzling afternoon sunshine bathed her white skin, limned her body like a marble statue under a spotlight—outlined her slim legs and waist, the soft curves of her stomach and hips, the swelling mounds of her full young breasts. An exquisite strutting statue—that became transformed as he watched.

The white knees that had been coming up so snappily slowed in midstride and descended with a languorous ripple of muscles that crept up through her body in sinuous, sensuous motion. Legs, arms, torso—all blended in a swaying, writhing glide that was an eptitome of lasciviousness.

Stark naked she minced along the street, her posturing body daringly inviting, reaching out lustful tentacles to grip her astounded audience. Like a pagan temple dancer, an Oriental harem favorite. . . .

BUCK SHERIDAN snapped out of the semi-trance that had held him immobile and darted toward her just as the astonished bandsmen came to their senses. They closed in around her, shielded her from the hundreds of staring eyes as they caught hold of her and tried to slip a coat over her shoulders. But the girl fought them savagely. She

tore the coat out of their hands and hurled it into their faces—while her weaving body writhed and undulated with hellish abandon.

"Martha — for God's sake!" they pleaded with her. "Take it easy just a moment—everything will be all right."

But the girl's eyes were blazing like those of an enraged tigress. An angry flush was mounting in her cheeks, deepening to a fiery red verging onto purple. With nostrils dilated and lips curling back from her teeth, she fought frenziedly to tear loose from their grasp, while unintelligible sounds that were like the mewing cries of a tortured animal seeped from between her clenched jaws.

"Don't try to stop her! Leave her alone! Sheridan shouted a warning as he flung himself into the circle that surrounded the struggling girl—but already he was too late.

Her eyes bulged from their sockets in her livid face as she beat at them with her fists and squirmed her scratched body partly out of their grip, but before she could break loose, her breath sobbed from her throat in a choked gasp. For a fraction of a second her figure straightened, tensed—and then went limp, to sag back into their arms.

Buck Sheridan did not need to crowd in any closer. He had seen men die from a stroke before. He knew that the girl was dead before she slumped into the arms of her friends — and instantly tragedy snapped him back to normal; brought uppermost in him the instincts of an alert investigator which had faded into the background in this carnival setting.

That girl had been killed—and her killer, or one who could lead the way to the murderer, was making his getaway!

Darting swiftly through the crowd that was converging on the disorganized Kawar nobles, he raced toward the station, his keen eyes searching for a car he had glimpsed only momentarily. A brown sedan. There it was—the car from which the girl had stepped; waiting there to be certain that the deviltry it had set afoot was completed!

A man sat at the wheel, bending forward to shift gears; a foreign-looking fellow, with a broad, high-cheekboned face. His lips were tightly clenched, his blue eyes steel-hard, as Sheridan leaped onto the running board and drove one fist into his face while the other clutched at the wheel.

The fellow's hat went off and revealed a head of bristly blond hair as he ducked to one side. Sheridan's fingers jabbed through the wheel, gripped the ignition key—but at that moment he glimpsed another figure that rose from the back of the car; a man who clutched an automatic. Barely in time he yanked backward and to one side. The pistol barrel smashed down on his left shoulder with such force that his arm was paralyzed. His numb fingers released the key, and he toppled off the running board—to stretch his length on the ground as the sedan sped away.

That chauffeur's face was familiar! But as Sheridan got to his feet, he combed his memory for the identification he was certain he could make; identification that eluded him exasperatingly. . . .

WHEN he got back to where the girl had fallen, the Kawar bandsmen were trying to hold the crowd back, while a physician knelt beside the still, coat-covered figure.

"Who is she?" Sheridan asked one of the bandsmen.

"Martha Howard—Lee Howard's daughter," came the reply. "She must have lost her mind—"

But Buck Sheridan wasn't listening. The victim was Lee Howard's daughter—and that information set his pulses pounding. Five minutes ago he had forgotten all about Doc Keating's uneasiness, had

dismissed it as foolishly fantastic—but now the Doc's misgivings flashed back into his mind. . . .

Robert Keating was a member of Bilma Oasis, the Albany lodge of Oraclers, to which Buck Sheridan also belonged. A prosperous chiropodist, with branch offices in Schenectady and Amsterdam, he found ample time to devote to the fraternal order, and was chairman of the convention committee, host to the thousands who had flocked into the city.

It was while making preparations for their reception that he had come to the little office from which Buck Sheridan conducted his one-man private detective agency.

"There is one thing about this convention that worries me, Buck," he had confided. "Of course, we are glad to have it in Albany, but it is unfortunate that it has to be here this year—because of Steve McDowell. If things had not happened the way they did—"

"I know," Sheridan had nodded. "McDowell would have been elected Grand Potentate this year."

For several moments silence had held them while both recalled the circumstances of the unfortunate McDowell affair.

Steven McDowell, a wealthy manufacturer, and a Past Potentate of Bilma Oasis, had been a member of the Grand Council of the Oraclers. Ordinarily progression of the Grand Council officers was automatic, the entire council stepping up one office each year—but a few months before McDowell would have been elevated to the rank of Junior Grand Potentate he had been involved in a noxious scandal.

Frank Wamester, an Albany attorney, had raided a hotel bedroom and discovered his wife in McDowell's arms. Wamester had promptly sued for divorce and had been awarded custody of his four-year-old son.

The scandalous publicity had ended McDowell's career as a state officer of the Oraclers. At last year's convention he had been dropped from the Grand Council and had returned to Albany a bitter man, claiming that his own lodge had sold him out. Since then he had married Irene Wamester, but he had severed his connection entirely with the Oraclers.

"I suppose I am fretting needlessly," Keating had mediated aloud, "but having the convention that should have elected McDowell here in Albany worries me. Call it a hunch, if you wish, but I'll feel more comfortable if I know that you are watching things, Buck. I want to hire you as a special officer for the duration of the convention."

Now Doc Keating's misgivings suddenly loomed in startling new perspective. Martha Howard was the daughter of Grand Potentate Lee Howard—one of the men who had been most emphatic in urging that Steven McDowell be dropped from the Grand Council!

And now Sheridan's recalcitrant memory suddenly began to function. In a flash of recollection he placed that German-looking fellow in the sedan—identified him as the chauffeur who used to drive Steven McDowell to the lodge building!

Lee Howard had a suite at the Knickerbocker Hotel, where most of the Grand Council officers were quartered. That was where Buck Sheridan cornered him. Dazed by the sudden, appalling tragedy, the Grand Potentate slumped in a chair in his bedroom.

"Martha—Martha," he mumbled softly. "I can't believe it! My little Martha—she hadn't an enemy—"

Sheridan watched him keenly.

"Martha had no enemies, and yet you are not wholly surprised that this has happened," he surmised bluntly.

"You may as well know—now that she is dead," the older man brokenly nodded acknowledgment. "I have been worried about Martha for several months. A pe-

culiar change seemed to be coming over her. She was moody, short-tempered—and then excessively affectionate. Several times she threw herself into my arms and kissed me with a fervor that astonished me—well, the way a normal girl never would kiss her father.

"That isn't all," the bereaved parent went on doggedly. "There were men too. Young men with whom she went out. Twice I interrupted barely in time. When I upbraided her she went all to pieces—broke down in tears and rushed to her room—"

Those halting words pounded into Buck Sheridan's brain—and with them came icy fear that seemed to congeal the blood in his veins. In that moment the shadowy, half-recognized apprehensions that had been his for the past few weeks suddenly took grisly form. Again he saw Martha Howard's nude body posturing shamelessly before hundreds of staring eyes—but the face was not Martha's. It was the lovely face of Jane Norton, Sheridan's own adored fiancée!

COLD, clammy perspiration moistened his upper lip and oozed out on the backs of his hands as memory whispered tantalizingly in his brain. Jane, too, had been acting strangely for some weeks. Now he remembered times when the astonishing ardor of her caresses had been so overpowering that he had fought against the impulse to brush aside his last scruples and yield to the mad desire that surged through him.

Yes, now he remembered times when Jane's movements had caught his attention and held it fascinated; movements that were so supple, so sensuously graceful that they had set his blood on fire—like Martha Howard's preliminary gyrations before she had given way utterly to her consuming passion. And he remembered the night, last week, when he had caught a half-glimpse of Jane's nude body in a mirror that commanded the doorway of her dressing room.

That, he had assured himself, was nothing more than an accident—but now the memory started a cold trickle down his back and unaccountably filled him with a yearning to clasp Jane tight in his arms and hold her there safe against he knew not what. . . .

It was almost time now for Jane to be arriving home from work. But before going to meet her, Sheridan stopped in the hotel corridor and talked briefly with Gil Tobin, the Knickerbocker's house detective, cautioned him to keep an alert eye on Lee Howard and the other Grand Council officers.

He met Jane just as she was approaching her building, and at once he noticed that she was more than usually fatigued. Managing the dress department of a large store was grueling work; too much for

Jane's strength, he told himself—and silently vowed soon to put an end to that.

"I've been on my feet all day," she sighed, when they had reached her apartment and she had changed to a pair of slippers. "We've had a continuous stream of Oraclers' ladies coming in to see our fashion show. I thought the day never would end."

"What you need is a drink to brace you up," Sheridan prescribed as he stepped to her cellarette.

"What I ought to do is pay Dr. Keating a visit," she murmured, "but he is so tied up with this convention that he has no time for patients."

Gratefully she sipped the glass of Scotch he had poured, while Sheridan watched her intently. The liquor was what she needed, he told himself. It brought color into her cheeks, put a fresh sparkle into her eyes. As it warmed her blood her smile became more genuine, her glance more animated—more—

Suddenly he felt a tingle steal through him as his gaze locked with hers. Jane was smiling at him—smiling with an invitation that no man could mistake. Her arms were reaching up to him, her lips half-parted—and then she was in his arms. With a gasp of satisfaction her lips closed hungrily on his in an avid, yearning kiss that filled his brain with mad, clamoring desire.

Jane's arms were clutching him tightly, drawing him closer and closer until the soft curves of her gorgeous body fairly enfolded him. Tense and quivering, she held him in an embrace that took utter possession of him. She was glorious, wonderful, incomparable—and she was his, all his to do with as he willed!

Sheridan's breath panted from his nostrils as his whole being responded to her passionate invitation. His tingling fingers strayed over the thrilling contour of her eager body. . . .

It was her eyes that stopped him, that shocked him back to his senses. Eyes that were blazing with the same frantic light he had seen gleaming from Martha Howard's as she fought with the men who were trying to save her from herself. Frigid fingers closed around Sheridan's heart as he stared into them.

Jane was in the grip of the same unholy passion that had caused the Howard girl's death! Suddenly sobered by that realization, he backed away and held her off.

"No, Jane!" he panted. "Please listen to me, darling! Please—"

His words were like cold water dashed into her face. She gasped and staggered away from him, while crimson blushes flooded her cheeks—and stark terror leaped into her shocked eyes. Like a person whe had suddenly awakened from a horrible nightmare she reeled back from the sheer brink of destruction!

CHAPTER TWO

Reunion in Hell

WHAT was this incomprehensible menace that was hanging over the woman he adored? He was still vainly groping for an explanation as he stepped out into the street an hour later—and then the honking of an automobile drove the mystifying problem from his mind. An expensive roadster had drawn up at the curb, and a young woman was leaning toward him from the driver's seat.

Sheridan peered at her—and a grin of recognition spread over his square-jawed, strong-featured face. Catherine Robinson! The sight of her stirred memories of turf-torn football gridirons, of gay college parties. In the days when Buck Sheridan had been Syracuse's star halfback, co-ed Catherine Robinson had been his "flame." That had ended with graduation, and although Catherine lived only as far away as nearby Schenectady, he had not seen her for several years.

"Taxi!" she laughed at him. "Where you going, Buck? Hop in and let me show you the big town."

Buck walked to the curb and stood beside the car. She was prettier than when he had seen her last, he told himself, but there was something curiously changed about her—a change that he sensed vaguely. Her invitation had seemed a jest, but he quickly discovered that she really meant it.

"I know Mr. Sheridan's a busy man these days, but you can spare a few hours for old times' sake," she coaxed—and her fingers closed on his wrist; soft fingers that ran up under his sleeve and caressed his forearm, to send little tremors creeping up to his shoulder. "I know a quiet little place where we can sit and talk—"

She was nervous and excited, striving to cover her tension with a show of flippancy—but her eyes betrayed her. They were feverish; shadowy grey eyes that were abrim with smoldering fire! Eyes that gleamed with predatory lust—like Martha Howard's!

Not until that moment did Sheridan recall that Catherine Robinson was the granddaughter of old John Robinson, influential Past Grand Potentate of the Oraclers who had engineered the displacement of Steven McDowell—and that realization quickly decided him. He stepped into the roadster, and Catherine swung it away from the curb.

Her destination proved to be a large private house near West Albany; a three-story stone building that had once been a pretentious dwelling but now was out of fashion and decidedly out of repair. There were half a dozen cars lined up at the curb in front of it.

A middle-aged woman met them at the door; a cold-eyed, hard-faced, overly made-up blonde who greeted them with an artificial mask of a smile and led the way to a large, dimly lit room. Sheridan's quick glance spotted a dozen or more tables around a postage-stamp dance floor. Several of the booths were occupied. Chortling laughter and the buzz of low conversation came from them.

As his eyes became sufficiently accustomed to the gloom he made out seven or eight men. Celebrating Oraclers. But it was the girls who amazed him. He recognized several of them, pretty young daughters of some of Albany's best families—but their scanty costumes and their amorous antics left little doubt of why they were there.

He had correctly labeled that enameled-faced madam the moment she opened the door, but he had little expected that her girls would be of this astonishing caliber. His fists hardened as he watched the off-color revelry all around him—but Catherine gave him little opportunity to observe anyone but herself. Her arm was tucked through his and her voice, low and husky, was close to his ear after she had finished the "soother" she had ordered as soon as they were seated.

"We can't talk here, Buck—this is bedlam," she complained. "Let's get out of here—upstairs where there is quiet. There are things I want to tell you, honey," she coaxed. Her lips were very close to his face, her breath warm against his cheek.

SHERIDAN'S first thought was to leave her there in the booth and go looking for that bleached-blonde madam—but Catherine was clinging to him so tightly that it would take force to get away from her. Better to humor her, he decided.

Unresisting, he followed the girl out into the hallway and up a flight of stairs to the corridor above. There Catherine opened a door and switched on a light, urged him into a bedroom. What happened then came so quickly that it caught him off-guard. Before the door closed behind them, the girl was in his arms, was murmuring endearments as her lips show-

ered kisses upon him and her clutching hands held him fast.

Edging away from her impetuous rush, he backed against the door—and heard a key turn in the lock behind him!

That snapped him into swift action. Grabbing the girl's arms, he forced them apart, free from his neck. She struggled frantically, with strength that amazed him; but he swept her aside, pushed her into a chair—and then leaped clear to charge against the locked door.

It creaked and trembled under the impact of his hundred and seventy pounds. But before he could throw himself against it a second time, Catherine Robinson was upon him again.

"Buck, darling!" she panted as her left arm closed around his neck and locked him in a vise-like grip. "Buck—"

Her right hand was fumbling at the neck of her dress; was loosening it, ripping it apart as she tore it from her body. She wore nothing beneath it, he saw as she pressed close against him. Bare to the waist, she struggled to hold him, struggled to capture his lips with her own—and then the tattered garment dropped to the floor and she was completely nude in his arms.

The lure of her scented body filled his nostrils. The throaty pleading of her low voice throbbed in his ears. Her panting breath was hot on his cheeks, her eager lips insistently seeking his mouth. Wild desire welled up within him and set his blood tingling; hot desire that set his pulses pounding as his fingers touched her warm, naked flesh—but he fought it down grimly.

"Stop it, Catherine!" he barked with desperate savagery. Then he saw her face in the full glow from the overhead lights.

Her eyes were gleaming like those of a mad woman, and her cheeks were crimson. One moment he had her arms imprisoned, and then they were free again. With berserk fury she clawed at him, tearing at his clothing, intent on ripping it from his body. It was useless to plead with her. She was mad—a creature utterly given over to animal passion.

Frantically they wrestled—until suddenly she went limp in his arms. Limp and ominously flabby—with the telltale laxness of a corpse!

Incredulous horror gripped Buck Sheridan as he stared down at that lovely body, stared at the empurpled face. Catherine Robinson had always been a sweet, clean girl; a good pal. A moment ago she had been vibrant with life, with seething desire—and now she was inanimate clay. . . .

A blistering curse gritted from his clenched lips as rage swirled blindingly into his brain. She was dead—murdered just like Martha Howard; and whoever had locked that bedroom door was responsible for her death! This time the hinges snapped and the door toppled outward when he charged half-way across the room to hurl himself against it.

Over it he leaped—straight at a fellow who crouched close beside the doorway. Sheridan's fist caught him squarely in the face, smashed him back on his heels. But at the same instant another opponent leaped from the opposite side of the door, and something heavy crashed down on his head.

Hundreds of stars swam in a burst of light that blinded him, but he managed to whirl around to confront this new antagonist. Through the dazzling glare he caught sight of a familiar, heavy-jowled, thick-eyebrowed face. He lashed out at it with his fist, but his arm barely seemed to move; was powerless to ward off the blow that connected with his jaw and dropped him to the floor.

SHERIDAN wasn't completely knocked out. He was dazed, half-paralyzed by that punishing blow. On his hands and knees, he leaned against the wall and shook his head until it cleared and his

strength returned. With it came identification of the man who had downed him.

That heavy-jowled individual was Steven McDowell's butler! His face was so distinctive that there could be no mistake. First McDowell's chauffeur, and now his butler. . . .

The house was silent when Sheridan got to his feet and reached the stairway. Warily he made his way to the floor below, but it was dark and deserted. The madam and her girls had fled and the customers had disappeared. Only Catherine Robinson's car still stood at the curb.

Sheridan needed that car. He slipped behind the wheel and drove—to Steven McDowell's mansion.

He arrived there just in time to see McDowell's car turn into the driveway; just in time to glimpse the manufacturer in the rear and the liveried chauffeur at the wheel. Not the foreign-looking chap; this was another man—and a few minutes later, when he rang the front bell, an unfamiliar butler answered the door.

Steven McDowell received Sheridan in his sitting room. He was a large, distinguished looking man with an impressive, heavy-featured face. A handsome man, except for the cynical gleam of his eyes and the half-sneer that haunted his lips—a man Irene Wamester could hardly be blamed for having preferred to her meek-faced, commonplace husband. Now he remained standing, a hint that the interview would be brief.

"I regret to hear that the Oraclers are having difficulties," he spoke with cold civility, when Buck had stated the situation, "but I do not see why you come to me. Surely the members of your Grand Council do not need my advice or help."

"I came here to question two men about those deaths," Sheridan told him. "One is the foreign-looking chap who drives for you. The other is the heavy-faced butler who was here the last time I was in this house."

"Gus, the chauffeur, and Walker," McDowell identified them readily. "Again, I fear, I cannot help you. Gus Hubert left my employ more than six months ago. I have no idea where he is—but I know where Walker is. In his grave. He dropped dead in New York ten weeks ago. Now, if there is nothing more you wish to know—"

Walker dead? Unconsciously Buck fingered the bump on the back of his head. No ghost had made that, and he was certain that he had not been mistaken in the ex-butler's unusual face. . . .

McDowell was watching him closely, and his satisfaction was unmistakable. He had no love for the Oraclers and he pretended none.

That visit had been fruitless, Sheridan told himself as he drove away from the house. Perhaps it was only coincidence that grisly tragedy had befallen two girls so closely connected with members of the Oraclers' Grand Council. Jane's father had not even been a member of the order.

Jane! Sheridan's scalp prickled as he realized that he was subconsciously including her among the victims of this inexplicable scourge! She *was* in danger, he admitted. He sensed her peril—and so did she; and the only way to insure her safety was to find out by what demoniacal means perfectly normal girls were being turned into sex-mad voluptuaries.

He had already called the police and notified them of Catherine Robinson's death, but to Keating he would report personally. . . .

The chairman was in the convention committee office in the Knickerbocker when Buck arrived, and his worried face mirrored trouble. Silently he listened to Buck's account.

"Martha Howard and Catherine Robinson!" he groaned when it was finished. "God help Evelyn Thrall!"

"Evelyn Thrall?" Sheridan echoed.

She was an Albany girl, a close friend

of Jane's. But, more significant, she was the daughter of Henry Thrall, the man who would be elevated to the office of Grand Potentate at this convention—the man who would be raised to the chair that Steven McDowell had expected to fill!

"She has disappeared," Keating's words beat into Buck's whirling thoughts. "She was at home tonight, and I asked the police to post a guard outside the house. Five minutes ago they found him with his skull crushed—and Evelyn was gone!"

CHAPTER THREE

Devils' Dance

EVELYN THRALL was gone, and by noon the next day Buck Sheridan felt more hopelessly inept than at any time during his life. Not only had the Thrall girl disappeared, but Gus Hubert, Walker, and the bleached blonde mistress of the house where Catherine Robinson had died all had vanished.

The police had raided the place on Sheridan's tip and found the Robinson girl's body. They had listed her, after medical examination, as a victim of apoplexy—apoplexy, Buck knew, that was caused by a hellishly over-stimulated sex-desire, a sex-mania that drove its tortured victims temporarily mad.

His own investigation had taken him to the Hall of Records. There he had found that the stone building was one of several in a parcel of real estate recently acquired by Steven McDowell!

Steven McDowell! Again the finger of suspicion was pointing him out!

Whoever was behind this inexplicable sex saturnalia was a murderous fiend. But what could be his motive? There had been no demands for extortion or ransom—simply those appalling manifestations of abnormal passion that had culminated in death for two of the victims.

And for Evelyn Thrall?

"Where is she, Buck? Where *can* she be?" Jane begged, when Sheridan lunched with her—and even as she framed her frantic questions her frightened eyes watched him fearfully, as if she was afraid of his answer! "Who could have kidnapped her? Her folks have little money. She has been working so hard building up her dancing school that she has had no time for anything else."

"How did she look—how did she act, when you saw her last?" Buck ventured cautiously.

"Tired," Jane answered promptly. "That was three nights ago. She had had a hard day and she showed it. She—"

Buck saw that she was trembling so that she could hardly speak. He reached across the table and clasped his hand over hers.

"I don't know why I should be so uneasy, Buck," Jane continued more calmly, "but to think of Evelyn like that poor Howard girl or that girl who died last night—"

She shuddered and the rest of the sentence remained unspoken, but the fear in her eyes finished it for her. Jane was not merely uneasy, she was afraid—afraid of something she did not understand. . . .

The afternoon of the second day of Oraclers' conventions is always the occasion of the big parade. After that, the night is given over to hilarious revelry, with bands and gayly clad marchers swarming through the crowded streets.

Buck had been through several of those uproarious demonstrations, but this night the celebration left him cold. Shuddering horror was abroad in that gay carnival, and he searched for it tirelessly—searched for it until suddenly he brought up short. In the crowd of jostling merrymakers he had spotted Gus Hubert, McDowell's ex-chauffeur!

The fellow seemed to have come from

the building next to the Knickerbocker. He hurried along purposefully, but Buck clung to him like his own shadow. The way led into one of the side streets to the left of Capital Hill; led to an address that narrowed Buck's eyes. The address of another of the properties McDowell had picked up in that parcel of real estate.

The place was dark; an old, two-story brick building, with a wide, ramshackle porch across the front. Hubert rang the bell, and the door opened—to reveal in a flash of dim illumination a bleached-blonde head that Buck recognized instantly!

The front of the building offered no opportunity for a surreptitious entrance, but at the rear Buck found a ground-level door. His skeleton key made short work of the lock, and he stepped into a pitch-black room. His flash revealed a kitchen; empty and dusty.

THE house was utterly silent as he closed the door behind him—and then the stillness was broken by a welling of sound that set his scalp tingling. The soft, muted strains of a phonograph playing the weird melody of "Desert Dawn." The music was coming from below—from the basement. Then he had found a stairway, was picking his way down to a dark hallway.

The music came from near the front of the house, where a sliver of light shone from beneath a closed door. Buck cat-footed up and knelt in front of it, to press his eye to the keyhole—and peer in at a scene that chilled his blood.

In the center of that basement room stood Evelyn Thrall. Stark naked, she writhed and swayed in time to the music. Perspiration dripped from her wide-eyed face and glistened on her bobbing breasts and undulating hips. Her hands clasped behind her head, she gave herself up utterly to the seething passion that gripped her—until suddenly she collapsed and dropped to the floor with a despairing moan.

Not until then did Buck see that her feet were secured in steel ankle-irons that held her to the floor. For an instant she lay panting there. Then the low whine of a dynamo rose above the music, swelled to a hum that seemed to drive a shaft of solid sound into his ears. The effect on Evelyn was instantaneous. She gasped and stiffened, clasped her arms around her head as if she would shut out the sound—and then clambered to her knees, pleading for mercy.

"Dance!" came the woman's inexorable command. "Up on your feet! Dance to the music!"

Buck edged to one side of the keyhole, until he could see part of one side of the room. There he spotted the source of the

penetrating hum—an electric ray-projector that played its beam full upon the girl. The hum increased, became a nerve-wracking drone—and suddenly Evelyn Thrall was on her feet. Her eyes blazed with the wild light of madness; an hysterical, half-animal whimper dribbled from her lips. Her slim body became a thing of utter, bestial abandon!

That was too much for Sheridan. Gripping his automatic, he flung the door open; leaped into the room and started for the ex-chauffeur, who stood operating the devilish generator. Then things began happening swiftly. The blonde madam screamed shrilly; the man Hubert dived to one side and snatched at the wall button, plunging the room into darkness just as Buck's feet became entangled in part of the girl's clothing that had been ripped from her body and scattered all around her on the floor.

He went down—but not before his gun had roared twice. A hoarse scream of agony and a gibbering laugh echoed the shots; but Buck was already back on his feet, charging toward the door, to seize the bleached blonde and drag her back with him as he fumbled for the light switch.

Again the overhead light flooded the room—and revealed double tragedy. Gus Hubert's body lay in a heap beside the generator. He was dead—and it might have been better for Evelyn Thrall had she died also. Heedless of what was transpiring around her, she sat on the floor, chattering and laughing insanely!

BUT the hard-faced bordello mistress was still alive. She snarled and spat, lashed out at him with clawed hands—until Buck pushed her back against a wall and jammed his gun into her stomach.

"Talk, and talk fast," he clipped. "What's the game? You're only small-fry; who is the boss? Start talking or—"

For a moment she seemed to debate calling his bluff, but the grim face that confronted her mercilessly was too much for her.

"I'll talk," she whimpered. "Just promise you'll let me get out of town, that's all I ask. Don't let him get hold of me. Steven McDowell, he—"

The name had barely left her lips when a gun roared from the half-open doorway. A black hole appeared like magic in the center of the woman's forehead, and an expression of utter amazement spread over her face. Desperately she tried to speak, but the words were drowned by the gurgle in her throat and she was dead before her body slumped to the floor.

Instinctively Buck Sheridan flung himself to one side, and then pivoted to catapult through the doorway. As he leaped into the corridor his gun lanced flame at a man who was scrambling toward the stairs—but others rose in back of him, beside him. A gun smashed down over his head, and he fell forward into a sea of enveloping blackness. . . .

When he opened his eyes and crawled dizzily to his feet he knew what he would find. Only the two corpses remained sprawled in the basement room. Evelyn Thrall was gone, and so was the electrical apparatus. Even the leg irons had been removed from the floor.

This was the second time they had tricked him, he scored himself relentlessly; the second time they had left him lying helpless when they could have killed him. . . . They were playing with him, baiting him like a child—and suddenly a terrible fear for Jane crept over him.

Did they know of her existence? Were they, even now, striking at her in retaliation for Gus Hubert's death?

Dread premonition was strong within him as he hurried from the building and found a telephone. Jane was not at home when he was connected with the apartment house switchboard, but the elevator operator had a message for him.

"Miss Norton, she say to tell you she's going to see Miss Thrall at the Hotel Knickerbocker," his words rang in Buck's ears like the clap of doom!

CHAPTER FOUR

Beyond the Door

JANE had gone to Evelyn Thrall—at the Knickerbocker! She had been decoyed into a trap! By now she was in the hands of the inhuman fiends—might already have been dragged off to a cellar like the one he had just left! Cold sweat bathed Buck Sheridan's fists as he dropped the receiver back onto the hook and stared blankly at the metal booth wall.

Jane—her feet manacled to the floor; her brain tortured by the maddening rays of that hell-conceived projector; her lovely body naked before those inhuman devils, writhing and contorting. . . .

Quickly Buck dialed the Knickerbocker number and asked for Gil Tobin.

"I haven't seen Miss Norton here tonight—but I'm mighty glad you called, Buck," the house detective answered. "I've got something hot on the Martha Howard case. I'm not talking over the phone—but get over here as quick as you can. Wait a minute," he broke off abruptly—and then, a few moments later, resumed: "Steven McDowell just came into the lobby. That ties in. I have a hunch things are going to start popping around here. Make it snappy!"

Buck did. Ten minutes later he strode into the Knickerbocker, but Tobin was not in the crowded lobby. He had gone upstairs to answer a call, the desk clerk informed him; and one of the elevator operators had just let him off at the third floor.

Sheridan followed. The third floor corridor seemed empty when he stepped into it, but when he rounded the turn that led into the right wing he quickly drew back flat against the wall. That was Tobin in the shadow of a doorway half-way down the hall. He was watching a woman who was coming down the corridor—a woman in a sheer black negligee which did little to conceal the rounded contours of her body.

She stopped and opened a door almost directly across from where Tobin was standing—and Buck's jaw sagged in amazement!

The light from within the room fell fully upon the face of Irene McDowell, Steven McDowell's wife! The low-cut negligée was opening, was falling back from her shoulders, to reveal her full-breasted,

MR. WRIGHT FOUND OUT HE WAS WRONG!
MR. WRIGHT: Gee, this stuff is awful! Why do all laxatives taste so bad?
MRS. WRIGHT: All of them don't. Ex-Lax tastes like delicious chocolate.
MR. W.: Ex-Lax? That's O.K. for you and Junior, but I need something stronger!
MRS. W.: No, you don't! Ex-Lax is just as effective as any bad-tasting cathartic.
LATER
MR. W.: I sure am glad I took your advice. It's Ex-Lax for me from now on.
MRS. W.: Yes, with Ex-Lax in the house we don't need any other laxative!
The action of Ex-Lax is thorough, yet *gentle!* No shock. No strain. No weakening after-effects. Just an easy, comfortable bowel movement that brings blessed relief. Try Ex-Lax the next time you need a laxative. It's good for *every* member of the family.
10¢ and 25¢
EX-LAX

mature figure—and her rapt face was smiling provocatively!

Like a man in a trance Gil Tobin walked toward her, stepped into the room after her—and the door clicked shut.

Recovered from his amazement, Buck catfooted along the corridor. For a few moments he stood irresolute outside the door, his ear close to the jamb—and again an icy trickle ran down his back. He had caught the unmistakable thud of a falling body, and then a quickly stifled groan!

He drummed his knuckles on the sturdy metal door, but there was no response; no answer when he grasped the knob and rattled it impatiently. At full speed he started for the stairway. With the desk clerk and a passkey he came bounding back, but, even before they got the door open, he was certain that they would be too late.

Gil Tobin's body lay on the floor, his skull battered in by a savage blow that must have killed him almost instantly. And that was all. Of Irene McDowell there was no sign—unless the open window gave mute evidence of the way she had gone.

Buck ran to it and looked out into the dimly lit court that served both this wing of the hotel and the office building next door to it. A sedan was just passing beneath the lights at the end of the court as it sped out into the street. The license plate was so dusty that he could not distinguish the number, but he made a mental snapshot of the machine and knew that he would recognize it again if ever he saw it.

"He's dead—murdered!" the white-faced desk clerk was gasping. "We—we ought to call the police."

BUT Buck Sheridan was staring down at something on the floor; something that made his heart pound like a trip-hammer. A buckle that had come from Jane Norton's dress—a peculiarly marked buckle that he could not possibly mistake!

Jane had been there in that room of death! She must have witnessed the murder—and now the killers had taken her God only knew where!

"You stay here and attend to the police," he directed, as he surreptiously pocketed the buckle. "I'm going after the rats who did this!"

Then he was past the gulping clerk; was streaking his way toward the stairs and the street, to hail a taxi and give the address of Steven McDowell's home. As the machine picked a way through the still crowded streets his mind churned at top speed.

Gil Tobin undoubtedly had uncovered damning evidence; might even have discovered the identity of the fiend behind this wave of horrible crime. To shut his mouth he had been murdered—and the body of Steven McDowell's wife had been the bait that had lured him to his death. Whether or not McDowell was in the clear as far as his ex-servants were concerned, there were questions he was going to answer about his wife—and about himself.

From the corner, Buck approached the mansion on foot, but half-way to the building he crouched low in the shrubbery and peered out into the street. A sedan was moving out of the McDowell driveway—the same sedan he had seen leaving the Knickerbocker back court only a few minutes ago!

So he had come to the right place! His nerves were tense, his face grim, as he approached a side porch. Cautiously he crept up to the French windows. There was a light in the living room beyond, but the room itself was empty. With a quick stab of his fist he broke one of the small panes and reached inside to turn the latch. The noise had been slight, but it was sufficient to bring Steven McDowell striding into the room.

McDowell brought up short when he recognized the intruder. His eyes bulged and his face paled, but the black muzzle

of the automatic that covered him cut short his indignant outburst.

"I am here again to ask some questions —and this time you're going to give the right answers, McDowell," Buck announced grimly. "First—what were you doing in the Hotel Knickerbocker a little while ago?"

"I went there because my wife called me on the telephone. Because she said that she needed me," McDowell answered dully.

"What was she doing there?" Buck probed.

"That's what I want to know—she was not there when I arrived. The call was a false alarm." Suddenly the manufacturer leaned forward. "Stop suspecting me, Sheridan," he begged. "I want you to help me. I need you. Irene was not in the hotel when I got there, but I know that she called me—I could not have been mistaken in her voice. I'm afraid—I'm afraid she has been kidnapped like the Thrall girl. They may be holding her there now, helpless. Come back with me. Help me search—"

HE WAS half out of his chair, apparently carried away by his earnestness—but Buck was faster. With one stride he reached the chair and shoved McDowell back into it, and then he sped across the room to the door by which the manufacturer had entered.

Even in the shock of surprise at seeing Sheridan there in his living room, McDowell had remembered to close that door behind him. He had guarded himself carefully, but Buck had detected a nervous tension, a frantic fear, that was unconcealable.

McDowell was obviously frantically eager to get him out of the house, to get him away from the room beyond that door —and when Buck flung it open he saw the reason why.

Slumped in a big leather chair in the center of McDowell's library was the naked corpse of Evelyn Thrall!

The brief moment of astonishment that held him transfixed in the doorway was Buck's undoing. Before he could swing back into the living room a pistol barrel jabbed against his spine.

"It will be as easy to dispose of two corpses as one," McDowell's voice, brittle with desperation, warned at his ear. "Drop that gun—quick, before you force me to pull the trigger!"

The man's nerves obviously were at the breaking point, his finger trembling on the trigger. Buck knew better than to disobey. His automatic dropped to the carpet and he allowed himself to be marched across the room to a closet. The door closed on him, and a key turned in the lock.

Before he could do more than begin to explore the tiny cubicle McDowell was back. With him he brought a looped rope that flipped over Buck's shoulders and was pulled tight to pin his arms at his sides; rope that went around and around his body, until he was secured like a mummy from his shoulders to his ankles. Tied up helplessly, he was thrust back into the closet—and this time the lock clicked with a note of dread finality.

CHAPTER FIVE

Hell's Master of Ceremonies

A PRELIMINARY testing quickly convinced Buck that Steven McDowell had done no amateurish job in tying him up. The rope was strong and tightly drawn; was secured in back by a line that ran from his ankles to his shoulders so that he could not bend forward or double himself up in a position where he could use his teeth.

To escape from those lashings was going to be a long, tedious, heart-breaking task. Doggedly Buck started at it. He tugged and squirmed, twisted and stretched, worked his wrists and ankles until they were raw. Before long every muscle in his body ached; yet he had made no apparent progress—and all the time he lay there helpless Jane was probably in the hands of those human monsters.

That torturing thought made him resume the struggle with mad frenzy—until he sank back utterly exhausted, his body wet with perspiration, his blood pounding in his temples as if it must burst through his veins. Hour after hour. He lost all notion of time; existence became measured for him in those periods of frantic struggle—and they went on endlessly.

Half a dozen times exhaustion overcame him and he dozed—only to be startled into wakefulness by the vision of Jane writhing and swaying horribly in the grip of consummate passion, while her agonized eyes begged him for help! Hour after hour. Buck's brain dulled, went into a semi-coma as that endless struggle went on. He became a creature of instinct, fighting the ropes automatically, his numbed limbs no longer sensitive to the searing agony of raw flesh.

Just when the ropes began to yield, he never knew. First one hand could be moved, and then another. Then he managed to twist around sufficiently so that his teeth could gnaw at the topmost strand—could gnaw and gnaw and gnaw. And then, miraculously, the ropes were unwinding, dropping from him, and he was free—free to lie there and suffer the agony of the damned as circulation was restored to his constricted limbs.

Once he was back on his feet it took only a few lunges at the closet door to splinter it and pitch him out into the library. It was broad daylight; nearly ten o'clock when his blinking eyes located a mantel clock. The girl's corpse was gone, he saw at a glance. The house was absolutely still, the noise of his escape apparently unnoticed.

Cautiously he investigated and soon discovered that the place was deserted. Steven McDowell had left, and so had the servants.

In the bathroom Buck washed the caked blood from his swollen wrists and opened the medicine chest to look for bandage and some sort of soothing lotion. Bandage was there, but the nearest approach to a lotion was a bottle of the same stuff Doc Keating had given Jane to use in massaging her tired ankles and feet. He passed that up and hurried home to attend to his doctoring.

The rest of that day was an ordeal as ghastly for Buck as the night through which he had passed.

Jane was gone! That tormenting thought reverberated through his brain remorselesly—but even as he searched everywhere for her he dreaded the moment he might find her. . . . Might find her like Catherine Robinson—like Evelyn Thrall. . . .

The long hours he had spent in McDowell's closet had not been entirely fruitless. During the periods of inaction his brain had worked ceaselessly—and out of that desperate cerebration had come several angles which he now investigated carefully.

With broker and banker friends he checked up on Steven McDowell's financial status. Always their testimony was the same. McDowell's finances were in excellent shape. The owner of several new electrical patents, his firm had a monopoly in its line and was earning profits that must already have made him a millionaire.

Toward evening he was closeted with a clerk of the Surrogate's Court; and when he left that office and walked down the corridor, his brain was so busy with new possibilities, new conjectures, that he would have gone right past Doc Keating without seeing him had not the little chiropodist grabbed him by the arm. Buck looked at him inquiringly.

"I heard you were over here and came on the run," Keating said softly. "I've been tipped off to a stag party in the Knickerbocker tonight. A very secret affair—so sub-rosa that it doesn't sound good to me, Buck. I got hold of two tickets—"

A stag! Again Buck felt his nerves tingling. Stags were not unusual on the last night of a convention, but with the sinister wave of sexual abnormality that had swept over Albany there was no telling what might happen at a party of that sort. Perhaps it was for this that those inhuman devils had been training Evelyn Thrall. . . . But she had died during the ordeal, and now—now, perhaps, Jane was to take her place!

THAT dread possibility was uppermost in Buck's mind when he joined Doc Keating at nine o'clock that evening. The stag was to be held in the Knickerbocker's ballroom, which was situated on the top floor of the building and was reached by a special, direct elevator.

The moment they stepped out of it into the crowded, smoke-filled room, Buck saw that the party was well under way. There were several hundred men present, and already their excitement had reached fever heat—whetted by drinks which were being freely dispensed from a table at one end of the room. The gaiety was more than that of mere alcoholic exhilaration, Buck quickly noticed; these men were wild-eyed, white-faced instead of flushed.

"It's a madhouse, Buck," Keating muttered. "Keep away from that liquor; ten to one it's doped. Lord knows I could use a soother myself, but I don't want any of that stuff."

Buck, too, could have used a "soother"—the word repeated itself in his mind, tugged at his memory—but he contented himself with one of the cigarettes that were spread beside the glasses. And very soon he dropped that to the floor and ground it beneath his heel—his pulse already beginning to quicken, his brain to whirl.

Whether or not the liquor had been tampered with, those cigarettes had been doped!

The lights dimmed almost as soon as he made that discovery, and spotlights flooded the orchestra platform at one end of the room that was to serve as a stage. Out onto it glided the first of the performers—and for half an hour Buck watched a standard stag performance; a succession of girls whose costumes became scantier and scantier, until they were almost non-existent.

With each new appearance the crowd roared its approval—and with each Buck became more convinced that his hunch had been wrong. These girls were all professional performers who went through their obscene routines with the callous ease of long experience.

"Sorry, Buck," Keating whispered. "Looks as if we are wasting our time here—"

But the voice of the back-stage master of ceremonies, coming to them through an amplifier, interrupted him.

"Now we have a special treat for you," it announced. "A local beauty whose per-

formance will put to shame what you have already seen. I have the pleasure to present—Miss Albany!"

Buck Sheridan was on the edge of his seat even before the back curtains parted to usher in a girl whose glorious body gleamed through the filmy draperies that were her only clothing—a girl whose entire face and head were covered by a Benda mask. As if she was in a trance she walked to the center of the stage and stood facing them stock-still. And then the strains of "Desert Dawn" came welling through the amplifier.

The effect of the music was magical. Instantly the still figure became animated. One by one she stripped off her flimsy garments until she stood before them completely nude—an exquisite body that swayed and weaved with sinuous grace; a pink and white living statue that barely moved from its position in the center of the stage. It was almost as if the girl were manacled there by leg-irons!

Buck's strong fingers gripped the edge of the seat as he stared at that lovely figure—the perfect breasts, the lithe legs and tantalizingly swaying hips. Who was she? The question throbbed in his brain—and he tried desperately to shut out the answer that clamored even louder for utterance.

That gorgeous, maddeningly inviting body could belong only to—*Jane!*

No, it could not be she; he would not believe it—and yet he *knew* that the answer was right. He was starting up from the chair when Doc Keating's hand closed on his arm and held him back.

"Wait—wait until we are sure," he urged.

But now Buck was sure!

AS THE swaying form twisted so that her left side was fully revealed to him he saw a birthmark just over the hip—a birthmark he had glimpsed fleetingly that evening when Jane's dressing room mirror had momentarily displayed her naked body!

"Jane!" he shouted as he leaped to his feet. "Jane!"

His cry rang above the excited hum of voices; seemed to stab through the mesmerism of the song and reach the girl's consciousness. Her hands went up to her head and gripped the mask, lifted it clear—to uncover the wide-eyed, half-stunned face of the girl for whom he gladly would have given his life. Jane Norton stark naked before those hundreds of lusting eyes!

Suddenly she seemed to realize her condition. With a frightened gasp she tried to cover her nudity, tried to hide herself from those gaping eyes. Then she turned and raced for the back-stage sanctuary.

Red fury surged through Buck's brain as he charged down the aisle, hurling men out of his way as he fought toward the platform. Doc Keating was running along just behind him. Buck turned his head for a brief glimpse and saw that the Doc had a pistol in his hand. Together they vaulted the low platform and dived through the back-stage curtains—into a large dressing room that was in wild confusion.

The naked performers were frantically cowering against the walls; but Buck had eyes only for the men who had almost reached a door at the farther end. Steven McDowell and a fellow who crouched behind him! McDowell was clutching a revolver, started to raise it awkwardly—but before he could fire Doc Keating's gun roared, and he pitched forward on his face.

Buck was almost within reach of McDowell when the manufacturer crashed to the floor. He leaped over the fallen body, smashed his fist into the face of the crouching stranger. With a snarl of rage the fellow bounded back; a husky bruiser who must have weighed all of two hundred and fifty pounds. His arms locked around Buck and they went down—just as the lights went out.

Pandemonium now raged not only in the dressing room, but outside in the ballroom. The shot and the girl's screams had precipitated a wild riot. Buck heard seats overturning, heard men yelling, fighting to get out.

And Jane was somewhere in that bedlam! Naked and half-hysterical, she would be helpless—but he could not go to her aid. He had all he could do to protect his head from the flailing fists that thudded against his neck and shoulders with savage force.

The fellow with whom he was entangled was a burly individual, a rough-and-tumble fighter who knew all the tricks of the gutter. From one end of the room to the other they rolled and threshed, while Buck strove desperately to reach his shoulder-holstered automatic; but his opponent gave him no chance to free a hand long enough to make the draw. He understood Buck's intention and guarded against it carefully. Too carefully—for his single-track vigilance afforded Buck just the opportunity he needed.

The thug watched that shoulder holster like a hawk—but he forgot about his own unprotected jaw. Suddenly Buck's fist, feinting toward the holster, swerved and came up with pile-driving force. Straight to the button, with a blow that snapped the fellow's head back and stretched him senseless on the floor.

CHAPTER SIX

Death Pays in Full

THE pandemonium had ceased when Buck got to his feet. The dressing room seemed empty, the ballroom quiet. Fumbling along the wall, he found the light switch, snapped it on—but his finger froze on the button as a piercing scream knifed through the still ballroom!

Jane's despairing scream—that was abruptly silenced!

With that heart-rending cry ringing in his ears Buck Sheridan raced into the empty ballroom and out to the lobby. A glance at the indicator revealed that the direct elevator was in use—and he knew that it was the closing of its door that had terminated Jane's scream. Now the lift was plunging her down into a literal hell!

There was no time to wait for one of the regular cars to make the trip to the roof. Buck sped across the lobby and found the stairs; pounded down flight after flight in a dizzying spiral to the ground floor—and then on down to the basement. The dimly lighted lower level was empty when he reached it, but he was certain that he caught the faint echo of retreating feet as he cleared the last few steps.

That was as it should be, and now there ought to be a doorway or a concealed entrance somewhere along this side wall between the hotel and the adjoining office building. But the wall seemed to be an unbroken stretch of solid masonry. Carefully he examined foot after foot under the beam of his pocket-flash—and at last he found what he sought; not on the wall but on the floor close beside it.

A dab of fresh blood on a recessed ring that was set in the top of a close-fitting trapdoor!

Buck put his finger through the ring and pulled up the trap. It opened into a pit that was filled with water mains and gas pipes. A short ladder ran down into it, and ten feet to the west another ladder ran up—into the office building next door. Swiftly he descended, and his light picked out the marks of recent footprints.

Cautiously he climbed the second ladder to another trap. It rose when he pressed up under it, rose beneath a small rug that had been thrown over it. When he pulled this aside his flashlight beam revealed a combination bedroom and living room and centered on a framed photograph that hung on the wall—a cabinet photograph of Gus Hubert!

These were living quarters. The ex-chauffeur had been janitor of this building!

Now the pieces of the diabolical murder puzzle were rapidly beginning to fall into place. Swiftly Buck's suspicions dovetailed—but before he had drawn himself all the way through the trapdoor a low, brittle voice snapped at him from the opening door of a closet as an overhead electric bulb lighted up the room and cast deep shadows.

"Don't be foolish, Sheridan—unless you want a bullet in your back!" it warned. "Climb out of there and raise your hands."

Something hard and round jabbed against his spine, and then the door at the rear of the room opened to admit Walker, the ex-butler. He stepped forward and lifted Buck's automatic from its holster, frisked him for other weapons. Not until then did Buck glimpse the man at his back—but sight of his captor's face was unnecessary.

"Okay, Keating, you win," he said glumly, as he bitterly reproached himself for not foreseeing this trap. "I had you figured for something of this sort—but the Hubert angle caught me napping. I suppose you got him the job here."

"Naturally," the chiropodist grinned, keeping well out of springing distance, his automatic leveled. "When our former janitor became too ill to work I fortunately knew of a capable candidate to nominate for the job—I've had my office in this building several years, you know."

"That completes the picture nicely," Buck said with bitter irony. "Gus Hubert was the only cog I needed. I knew that Irene McDowell and the killer who murdered Gil Tobin never escaped from that open third-floor window of the Knickerbocker; and I was fairly certain that Jane Norton and the corpse of the Thrall girl never were in that room. So this is the answer, eh? You grabbed Jane before she reached the hotel and held her down here—planted her buckle in the hotel room so that I would find it. How did you get Irene McDowell down here? By way of the freight elevator, I suppose."

"Excellent, Buck, excellent!" Keating applauded mockingly. "You are doing so well that I would not dream of interrupting. You know the whole story, don't you?"

"I KNOW that you are a murdering monster!" Buck flung at him. "I know that you have been using your chiropodist business as a cover to prey on your patients. While you were working on their tired feet you considerately plied them with your 'soothers' to pick them up; drugged them with liquor that was loaded with aphrodisiacs! That 'smoother' business was a mistake—you shouldn't make use of a nickname so readily spotted. That was how I knew that Catherine Robinson was one of your patients."

"Thank you, Sheridan," Keating grinned. "I'll remember that for future use. You are very helpful—both you and Tobin. He was so efficient at catching my miscues that he had to be eliminated, and now I fear you have reached the same point. I'm sorry, Sheridan—I really intended to let you live—"

"So that I could pin the guilt for your murders on Steven McDowell," Buck spat his contempt.

He had been desperately prolonging that conversation, hoping to find an opportunity to hurl himself upon Keating, but the chiropodist never relaxed his vigilance. His finger was alert on the trigger, and now Walker was again at the door.

"Get going, Buck," Keating commanded. "Walker is an excellent guide. He'll show you the way."

The way led through the doorway into the main cellar, across it to a large, ce-

ment-walled room at the rear—a lighted storage room in which retired office furniture and packing cases were kept.

"Right over here," Keating directed, the unwavering gun muzzle emphasizing his command.

Helplessly Buck walked forward until the chiropodist halted him—when Walker bent over warily to snap leg-irons around his ankles. Anchored there in the center of the floor by the firmly secured irons, he could not move more than six inches in any direction!

What did they intend to do? Were they going to subject him to the torture Evelyn Thrall had endured? Were they going to turn him into a slavering sex-maniac?

Buck girded himself to stand the coming ordeal—but the first glimpse of what awaited him struck terror deep into his soul. Out from behind a barrier of packing cases Walker and Keating brought two women—Irene McDowell and Jane! Two women whose eyes shone with unnatural brilliance, whose cheeks were flushed, who moved as if they were dazed.

The storage room had been crudely arranged with miscellaneous articles of furniture. Desks, chairs, a reception room couch and a board room table lined its walls. To the couch Walker led Irene McDowell, while Keating dropped into a large overstuffed leather chair and drew Jane down into his lap. He grinned mockingly at Buck as the drugged girl's arms went around his neck and her eager lips sought his.

"Jane!" Buck yelled frantically. "Watch yourself, Jane! For God's sake —snap out of it!"

But she did not seem to hear him. The touch of Keating's lips swept away the last vestige of the coma that had gripped her; turned her into a creature of avid craving. His fingers were plucking at her torn dress, unfastening it—and she helped him! Swiftly she ripped off the garment,

the only stitch of clothing she wore, and was naked in his arms—while Buck pleaded with her in vain.

DESPERATELY he tugged at the leg-irons, but they were fastened to the floor by rings imbedded deep in the concrete.

Curses and threats raved from Buck's lips as he realized his own impotence. His voice rose to a wild shout—but still he could not seem to penetrate Jane's dormant consciousness.

"Yell as loud as you like," Keating jeered. "The building is empty, and this room is just about sound-proof."

But now Buck was not the only one who was shouting. Walker, pressed back so that he was half-sprawled on the couch, was struggling frantically with Irene McDowell. Her clothing almost all torn from her body, she was wrestling with him, was tearing at him with her clawing hands. Panting for breath, he ordered her to stop, shouted curses at her.

Leaping up from the couch, he seized her around the waist and threw her to the floor; held her helpless so that her hands could not reach his face, so that she could only writhe and strain to tear loose. For several minutes that furious struggle lasted—and then suddenly it was over. The woman's body went limp, and Walker drew back, staring at her purple face.

Irene McDowell was dead—a victim of the raging passion that had brought swift death to Martha Howard and Catherine Robinson!

Walker cursed savagely as he shook her limp body and Doc Keating whirled, staring in dismay. For an instant his attention was distracted from Jane—and in that instant Buck Sheridan made his last, desperate bid.

"Jane! Here, Jane darling!" he shouted. His arms were held out to her.

Before Keating could stop her, she had slipped from his lap and was answering that call. But the chiropodist was after her in a moment. He caught her before she could reach Buck, seized her by the shoulder and whirled her around. Buck's last hope faded. The murdering devil was pulling her away, was dragging her back—until suddenly she broke away from him. The strength of her mad passion staggered Keating, thrust him back—and Buck's eagerly straining fingers fastened in his coat collar!

Like a rag doll Robert Keating was jerked off his feet and yanked into Buck's arms. Buck's fist smashed into his face with all the pent-up fury of those age-long minutes of helpless impotence; smashed again—and then Buck's steely fingers closed around his throat.

Tighter and tighter those relentless fingers clamped, ten sinewy vise-teeth that sank deeper and deeper. Blood spurted as they ripped their way through skin and flesh; cartilage tore and bones cracked—and the last breath of life gasped out of Keating's mangled throat. . . .

Before the sagging body had toppled to the floor Buck's hand was in Keating's pocket, his fingers closing on a bunch of keys. One of them fit the lock of the leg-irons, and in a moment he was free!

Suddenly conscious of his danger, the ex-butler snatched out an automatic and fired. The bullet drilled into Buck's shoulder like a red-hot iron, but before the trigger could come down a second time he had reached his mark and Walker staggered back from a body blow that doubled him up.

"Now!" Buck gritted, as he straightened the fellow up and backed him against the wall; lashing out with lightning blows that seemed to come from everywhere.

THE heavy jowls sagged and tore away from the cheeks, hung horribly from his face until they dropped bloodlessly to the floor. He battered that face to pieces—until all likeness to Walker, the butler, had disappeared and Frank Wamester cowered against the wall, begging for mercy! Frank Wamester, the man who had divorced Irene McDowell when he found her in McDowell's arms. . . .

At that moment Buck caught sight of Jane's eyes fastened upon him, saw her coming toward him—and he smashed home the blow that drove the whimpering killer's head back against the stone wall. Wamester dropped to the floor. . . .

"Jane, darling," Buck soothed, as he took her in his arms and tried to quiet her, tried to bring her back to normal.

But the girl was like a stranger, like a lusting animal. She did not seem to recognize him; hardly seemed to hear him as her arms went around him.

Cold terror stabbed through Buck Sheridan at that moment. To yield to this mad passion would scar Jane's soul with a ghastly memory that nothing ever would be able to eradicate—and yet, if he fought her, death hovered close to snatch her!

"Jane, darling!" He put all the anguish of his aching heart into that plea. Close to her ear his lips whispered; whispered the sweet nothings that had been sacred memories to her—until at last her body was limp and yielding in his arms.

Horrified, he stared down at her still face—but it was not purple; it was pale, almost ashen. Jane had fainted. . . .

When she came back to consciousness

she clung to him while tears ran down her cheeks, but he held her in his arms without fear. The sex-hysteria had run its course, and now she clung to her man with the trust of a clean, wholesome love.

"Doctor Keating—I can't believe it."

"He was a perfect tool for Frank Wamester," Buck told her. "Keating was heavily in debt and facing criminal prosecution. Frank Wamester was his attorney. He knew of Keating's critical situation and took advantage of it."

"But how could murdering helpless girls make money for him?" Jane wondered. "I don't see—"

"Neither did I—until I dropped in at the Surrogate's Court this afternoon and checked up on several items," Buck nodded. "Steven McDowell was a millionaire, and he had no living relatives except his wife—which means that she would inherit his entire estate upon his death. She, in turn, had made a will, shortly after the birth of her son, leaving any property she might possess at the time of her death to the child.

"Wamester was after a fortune. By killing McDowell, the estate went to Irene. Then, when she was killed, the youngster would inherit it—and Wamester, the child's guardian, would be the administrator."

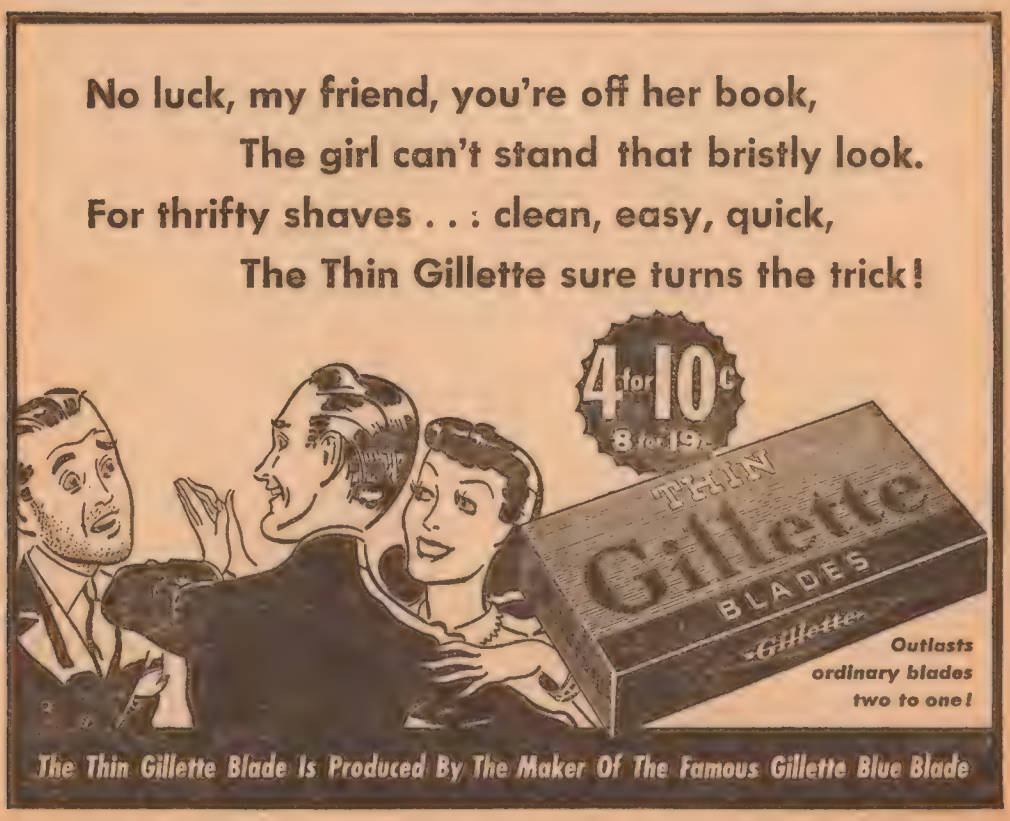
"And that was why Keating retained you—so that you would uncover the evidence that would protect them!" Jane gasped. "For money, they were willing to commit such horrible crimes—"

"For a fortune and for revenge," Buck corrected. "Wamester hated McDowell and the woman he once loved—"

"No, Buck darling," Jane whispered; "Frank Wamester never knew what love meant. If he did, he never could have perverted it so horribly."

And for that Buck had no answer.

THE END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House of the Mad Butcher

A Novelette of Spine-Tingling Terror and Mystery by

RUSSELL GRAY

I should never have allowed those three young girls to cross the threshold of our house—for we were a tribe accursed. The seeds of madness that had been planted in our blood three hundred years ago, had flourished until there was no escape from its ghastly murder lust!

CHAPTER ONE

Curse of the Weatherlys

THREE centuries ago, the oldest son of John Weatherly had brutally outraged and murdered a young girl and had fled from his home into the

Was it I who in my sleep of madness had thrust that deadly knife between her breasts?

deep woods to spend the rest of his life among the Indians. Several years later, his father, a huge, bearded, somber man, had watched with grimly righteous approval as his wife was burned at the stake as a witch. Five years ago, my cousin, Luke Weatherly, had slain the girl he loved and had been committed to an insane asylum.

Repeat those three incidents many times and you have, in brief, a history of the Weatherlys.

I am the ninth descendent of John Weatherly who came to America a decade after the landing of the Mayflower and who was among the first white men to make his home on Cape Cod. . . I, too, am named John Weatherly.

As my car hummed along the cape, a sense of depression came over me. Ordinarily one is anxious to revisit the house where one was born and brought up. But I hated the place—the old people who lingered on, the stuffy gloom of its interior, and the ghosts of generations of Weatherlys connected by a thin red line of degeneracy, and worse, which led directly from the first Weatherly and his oldest son to Luke, the insane murderer.

Yet here I was, returning for no reason which made sense. I'd achieved my stake in Detroit; I'd become part of the noise and crowd and wealth of the city. But something deep inside of me drove me back to the white house on the dunes, and its ghosts.

"How charming!" Lydia Poole, the golden-haired girl at my side, exclaimed.

She was pointing to a typical Cape Cod

cottage: the usual story and a half, foundation flat to the ground, porchless, gabled, and spotless white.

"Is your house like that?" she asked.

I nodded. "The Weatherly house is one of the oldest in the country. It hasn't changed much, inside or outside, since it was built nearly three hundred years ago."

"It must be delightfully quaint. I'd love to see it."

I glanced sideways at her golden beauty and a little tremor of fear came over me. The Weatherly house was no place for her or for anybody else who was young. I don't know why I felt that way, except that I kept thinking of the Weatherlys, how every generation the streak of evil had cropped out in one or more of them.

It was odd about Lydia Poole. I had known her for only a little over an hour and already my feelings toward her were extremely personal. It couldn't have been only because of her beauty; I'd known girls as lovely and I hadn't felt the same way about them. Maybe it was the business called love, I wondered, and the thought frightened me.

WHEN something had cracked inside of Luke and he killed Hattie Saunders, I had resolved that I would be the last of the Weatherlys. The strain of degeneracy would be conquered only by allowing the family to die out. Save for myself and Luke, the job was almost finished. My two aunts and my uncle were too old to do anything but die.

"It's quite a distance off the road," I told her. "If you stop off, you'll never reach Provincetown tonight."

I'd picked up Lydia Poole and her two friends, Mary Butler and Ida Kennedy, near Buzzards Bay. They had set out from Boston that morning to hitchhike to the tip of the Cape, where they intended to stay for a few days.

Mary Butler leaned forward from the back seat. "It'll be dark in a few minutes," she said. "I don't think we ought to try for another hitch at night. We could spend the night around here and go on to Provincetown early in the morning."

"Perhaps we could be put up in your house, Mr. Weatherly?" Ida Kennedy put in. "They say nearly all Cape Cod houses accommodate tourists. It's supposed to be a major industry."

My fingers tightened on the wheel. "Sorry, but the Weatherlys have managed to resist the temptation of commercialization."

"But there might be a place not far from you," Lydia Poole suggested.

She was looking at me with something in her eyes which should have made any man feel warm all over. It made me cold instead.

There was no way I could talk them out of their suggestion, so I agreed to find a place near my home. But not too near, I resolved. The Weatherly house was considerably off the main road, and in the morning they wouldn't have time to stop off.

I drove for another twenty minutes until twilight had deepened into night. Then I started to stop off at tourist cabins. It was at once obvious that it would be tough getting the girls settled for the night. Every available place was taken. After a while we tried private cottages catering to tourists, with no better luck. Every place had a NO VACANCY sign out.

"Looks as if we'll have to sleep on the dunes," Mary Butler commented.

"Or that Mr. Weatherly will have to put us up after all," Ida Kennedy added hopefully.

The situation was becoming desperate, from my point of view. If I didn't find quarters for them soon, I'd be forced to bring them home. And part of me wanted to do just that—to have Lydia Poole near me for another twelve hours. It would be lovely with her tonight on the dunes in

back of the house, with the breeze blowing through her golden hair as we strolled arm in arm along the bay. Silly to worry about superstitions, about ghosts.

At the same time a voice within me kept warning: No, no! You know that something evil lives with the Weatherlys and has been part of the house since it was built. Something which made five Weatherlys kill the women they loved, which made another stand by while his wife was burned at the stake. Something which made nine of them take their own lives and sent seven to the madhouse. That's history. That's in the family records.

ANOTHER hour passed and still we continued the hopeless search for quarters. There did not seem to be an available bed left on all the Cape.

"Here's a place," Ida Kennedy cried. "It has a sign up."

I'd seen the house and had been prepared to hurry past it. It was the one place where I did not want to stop. Automatically, however, my foot came down on the brakes. Mary Butler threw open the back door and went out, and then it was too late to do anything but wait.

In two minutes she returned with Colonel Saunders. That's what I had been afraid of—that I would have to meet Colonel Saunders face to face. For it had been his daughter whom Luke had killed.

He came forward, a thin, short man with a military mustache, and he peered into the car through weak eyes.

"I think I can put you up, young ladies," he said. Then he saw me. "Why, hello, John. Glad to see you home again."

"How are you, Colonel?" I said.

He shoved a small hand through the car window and we shook hands. The girls got out of the car and so did I.

Colonel Saunders plucked my sleeve and pulled me out of earshot of the girls.

"Back to stay, John?" he asked.

"Just for a visit."

He rubbed a hand over his mouth and coughed. "Look here, boy," he said. "They say you left home because of the disgrace of Luke—ah—" He let the rest of the sentence melt away, then coughed again and went on: "You needn't have taken it that way. Luke was a fine, upstanding boy until—until—well, I wouldn't have let Hattie go with him if I'd suspected. Anyway, boy, forget it. It wasn't anybody's fault, not even Luke's. Even the law doesn't blame an insane man."

"That's right," I said.

We moved back to where the girls stood waiting.

"Don't forget, we'll be over to see you tomorrow morning," Lydia said as I held her soft hand in mine.

As the three girls went up the walk to the cottage, I stood looking after them. I resolved to make it my business to be out when they came. The temptation of seeing her once more might prove to be too much for me.

At the door she turned and waved. My heart tightened within me. Then I got into my car and drove on.

QUAINT and charming was the way to describe the Weatherly cottage as I approached it from the narrow winding road which ran through a field of stately pines. Behind it, Cape Cod Bay was a sheet of blue-grey glass. Yet I couldn't help thinking that it had been on a night like this, five years ago, amid charm and apparent serenity, that I had come across the corpse of Hattie Saunders.

My cousin Luke had been standing over the dead white thing which shortly before had been an attractive living girl. Until ten minutes before he had been eminently sane—tall like all the Weatherlys, with gentle features and friendly eyes. Then something had snapped within him and the curse of the Weatherlys had pushed

through to the surface, and he had ravaged and slain the girl whom he had loved above anybody in the world.

I shall never forget the demoniac laugh which had poured from his throat as he had stood there staring down at the naked, crumpled body. After the initial wave of horror had swept over me, I had been possessed by a panicky urge to flee—not only from Luke but from all the Weatherlys. But even then I had known that there was one Weatherly from whom I could never flee. Myself!

Somehow I had found the courage to go over to Luke. Forever seared on my brain is the picture of how he turned to me with no gentleness left in his face, no friendliness in his eyes; how he had prodded Hattie's body with his foot and laughed again in a way that no normal human being could laugh. And suddenly he had flung himself on me with an animal howl. I am not sure why. Perhaps he had thought that I wished to take the white, dead thing away from him. Anyway, we had fought there on the beach, and he would have killed me had he been able. By the time I had knocked him into unconsciousness, I was half-naked and bloody and more than a little mad myself.

I had called the police and they had taken him away and eventually he had been sent to a madhouse. A week later I had left home. And now I had returned because I had not been able to help myself.

THE front door, as always, was open. And I stepped into the living room which had not changed greatly since the first of the American Weatherlys. It had not changed at all since I had left. Even the three people sitting in the overstuffed chairs gave me a sensation that I'd just stepped out of the house for a minute.

They were old, my two aunts and my uncle—older than their years, as if they had been born with the house and, living or dead, would forever be a part of it.

Uncle Edward was at the table, poring over a newspaper. He'd been as tall as Luke and myself once, but now he was shrunken. He looked up at me, stared at me with rheumy eyes, nodded, and went back to his paper. Aunt Rachel, tiny and wizened, rocked in a Cape Cod rocker and hummed tunelessly to herself and stared fixedly at nothing. She was not aware of my presence.

Aunt Cora was knitting with black wool and nodding drowzily. She was short and plump and her fat face was imperturbable, as if it had never mattered that her husband had killed himself for no reason anybody ever knew; that her son, Luke, was a murderer and a madman. She was the first who noticed that there was anything unusual in my presence there.

"It's you, John," she said. "We're glad you're home. Aren't we, Rachel? Edward, our John has come home."

"Eh?" Uncle Edward looked up at me for the second time. "Oh, John. Sit down." And he returned again to his newspaper.

"Good evening, John," Aunt Rachel said. "You've been away a long time. A year. Longer. We've missed you."

Ichabod was still alive, and he had no right to be. He had lived longer than any cat should live. He was a tom, bigger than any I'd ever seen, with wild reddish fur and malevolent yellow eyes. He was on one of the chairs, his back arched as he spat at me. I had always detested him and he hadn't felt any more kindly toward me. I can swear he remembered me, remembered even his hatred of me.

Little by little my aunts and uncle roused themselves and started conversation. It wasn't easy. In the middle of sentences they'd forget what they were saying. Finally I carried my valise into the bedroom in which I had been born.

I was unpacking when I heard voices at the front door. There were girls' voices among them, and one that I was certain that I would remember always. I looked out of the window. Colonel Saunders was there with Lydia Poole and her two friends.

"I had promised to put these young ladies up, but now I find that I can't," Colonel Saunders was saying. "Some people had made a reservation, but I'd thought they weren't coming. Now they showed up after all. I thought, Rachel, that you—"

"Why, certainly, Andrew," my aunt's voice came from inside the doorway. "I'll be delighted to find beds for the poor girls."

She hurried out of the room and to the front door. I stood just inside the door so that those outside wouldn't see me.

"Aunt Rachel," I whispered. "You don't take tourists."

"Oh, it's you, John." Her thin mouth became petulant. "We can't turn those girls out into the night."

"Mr. Weatherly?" Lydia Poole stepped into the house. "Don't you want us here?"

"That's not it. I—you—see—" I stammered, making an utter fool of myself. "Of course, you're welcome," I concluded lamely because under the circumstances I couldn't say anything else.

That was when I happened to look down at my feet and saw Ichabod, the tom cat, staring up at Lydia with his yellow eyes. It struck me that there was something human in his gaze—something incalculably hellish. Then inwardly I tried to laugh at myself and at my fears, calling myself a superstitious fool and an old woman.

But it didn't do any good. I couldn't rid myself of the conviction that by allowing those attractive young girls into the house, the gateway to everything evil in the history of the Weatherlys was being thrown wide open.

CHAPTER TWO

Satan Is a Cat

INSIDE the cottage, the three girls became rapturous over the ancient birdseye maple furniture, the ornate gilt what-not, the daguerreotypes of my ancestors, and all the rest which gave me a sense of living in a house of the long dead past.

Uncle Edward had at last found something to rouse his interest. His gaze shifted from Lydia Poole's slim, golden loveliness to Mary Butler's voluptuous body, to Ida Kennedy's frail, dark beauty; and in the depth of his rheumy eyes something smoldered which I could not understand but which I didn't like. Aunt Cora wore a strangely smug smile on the corners of her bloodless mouth, as, over her flashing knitting needles, she appraised her guests. Once I caught my uncle and Aunt Cora nodding slowly to each other as if they shared some secret knowledge.

I was showing Lydia Poole the family Bible when suddenly Mary Butler screeched. She was sitting on the horsehair sofa and staring down with something like horror at Ichabod, the cat, who was rubbing his huge body sensuously against her leg. She pulled her leg away, then laughed weakly.

"The cat gave me quite a start," she explained. "I felt something against me, and then I saw it, so big and—oh!"

Ichabod had flung himself at her, his bared claws hooking into her skirt. I strode across the room and kicked him with such force that he rose a foot from the floor and slammed against the wall. He whirled with arched back, spitting, his yellow eyes blazing hatred.

"John!" Aunt Rachel scolded. "I'm surprised at you."

Aunt Cora lifted her plump body from the chair. "You girls must be tired. Come, I'll show you to your rooms."

She led the way upstairs. I brought up

the rear. We were strung out in single file on the staircase when Mary Butler screeched again. How Ichabod got past me on those narrow stairs, I don't know, but there he was running between Mary's legs. I brushed past Lydia who was between Mary and myself. Spitting, Ichabod evaded my kick and ran down the stairs.

"Persistent creature, isn't it?" Ida Kennedy giggled. "I think it has a crush on you, Mary."

Nobody else thought it was funny.

There were three bedrooms upstairs, each with gabled roofs sloping so low to the side walls that one couldn't stand erect save in the middle of the rooms. Two of the bedrooms were connected, with an entrance from the hall to only one of the rooms.

The third room was at the other end of the hall. I tried the door. It was locked.

"Are you putting one of the girls up in here?" I asked.

Aunt Cora gave me a reproachful look. "Why, John, you know that is Luke's room."

"Aren't you ever going to use it again?"

"That is Luke's room," she repeated stubbornly.

I LET it go at that. The poor soul was convinced that her madman son would once again come home to live with her.

"Is there a shower in the house?" Mary Butler asked.

"Nothing as modern as that," I told her. "However, we have a bathtub downstairs."

"Anything, after an all-day trip. I'm first, girls."

As I left, Lydia touched my arm. "It's too early to go to sleep. The dunes must be lovely at night."

That's what I had been hoping for, to walk with her in the moonlight on the dunes. But now that she wanted to also, I found myself making excuses: it was late and she was tired and everything else I could think of.

She looked at me coldly. "Well, of course, if you don't want to."

"More than anything else," I said. "But—" I hesitated. She was so very lovely. "All right, let's go."

Outside the house she tucked her hand through my arm. Neither of us said anything as we strolled to the beach. This should have been ideal, but cold lay over my heart.

Suddenly I knew what it was. On approximately this spot I had seen my cousin Luke, his face twisted with madness, standing over the naked body of the girl he had just murdered. An hour before that he had been as sane and normal as I. And then it had struck him, the heritage of degeneracy—the heritage which might overwhelm me also. Suppose the same thing also struck me now, or five minutes from now, and I turned on this gorgeous girl. . . .

"You're trembling," Lydia said. "Is there anything wrong? You've been acting so strangely since I came here. You seem a different person than I knew in your car."

"Do I? Maybe because I've come back home after such a long absence."

She studied my face. "Why didn't you want me to stay here overnight? Why didn't you want to come out here with me? I'm sure it's not because you dislike me."

"Dislike you!" I echoed. "Good God, Lydia, I—"

I kissed her then. I hadn't planned it, but my lips just dropped down to hers and she was warm and throbbing and responsive in my arms. "John!" she muttered, running a soft hand over my cheek, and we kissed again.

And then a girl screamed.

Both of us stiffened. The scream was repeated, fear-laden, and it came from the house.

Side by side we ran, I holding my long legs in check so as not to get ahead of Lydia. The screams went on and on.

"It's Ida or Mary!" Lydia gasped. "What on earth could be happening?"

I didn't answer. My thoughts had turned into a blur of horror.

They were gathered in front of the bathroom door—my two aunts and uncle and Ida Kennedy who was clad only in a nightgown. The screams came from beyond the door.

Uncle Edward was rattling the knob. "Let me in, girl! Can't you open that door?"

Only a hook and eye fastened the door. I brushed Uncle Edward aside, took a couple of steps back, and hurled my shoulders against the door. It flew open instantly.

ICHABOD was in the bathtub with Mary Butler. She was half in the tub, half out, trying to hold the huge cat from ripping her naked body with his claws.

For a long, bewildered moment I stopped dead, then plunged forward. I got my hands on the back of the cat's neck and swung him against the wall. He landed on his feet and streaked through the door.

With a hoarse moan Mary sank back into the tub and her head bobbed under the water. As I lifted her, I saw that the water was tinted red with her blood. There were ugly gashes over her full breasts and on her abdomen and along one smooth thigh. Weakly she got her feet over the side of the tub and slumped against me. Her wet body dampened my clothes.

They had all crowded into the bathroom. Lydia and Ida were, as yet, more worried about Mary's wounds than frightened. Aunt Rachel looked puzzled, while that smug smile I'd seen before was still clamped on Aunt Cora's lips. Uncle Edward's eyes were no longer old and tired; something hot and unpleasant had come into them as they roved over Mary's unclad body.

The tableau couldn't have held for more than a few seconds. Then Mary remembered her nudity. She pulled away from me and snatched a towel from the rack and held it in front of her. Two scarlet spots appeared through the pallor of her cheeks.

"What happened?" I asked.

"While I was bathing, I happened to glance at the floor and that horrible cat was looking up at me." Mary trembled, holding the towel closer to her. "You may think I'm crazy, but I felt ashamed because that cat was looking at me while I had no clothes on. Its eyes seemed human and—and masculine. Then suddenly it leaped right into the bath with me."

"What?" I exclaimed. "A cat deliberately leap into water!"

"This one did. It's not like any cat I've ever seen. It nozzled its wet fur against me. When I screamed and tried to throw it out, it started to claw me."

Aunt Cora's chuckle sent a shiver through me. "He liked you. The moment you came in he wanted to be friends."

Lydia threw an angry look at Aunt Cora and went over to Mary. "Did he hurt you badly? You're scratched all over."

Mary's voice grew shrill. "I don't mind those scratches. It's the way that cat looked at me, and then jumped into the bath with me."

Aunt Rachel said: "You poor girl. Here, we have some bandages and iodine in the medicine chest. The rest of you had best leave us for a while."

Lydia and Aunt Rachel remained in the bathroom to attend to the girl. I closed the door behind me. Uncle Edward's eyes were now fixed on Ida whose skimpy night-gown didn't provide much

cover for her body. She crossed her arms over her breasts and ran toward the staircase at the back of the house. Uncle Edward and Aunt Cora looked after her, then at each other, and they smiled.

When the three women came out of the bathroom, Mary Butler was wearing a white robe. It must have been Aunt Rachel's because it was much too small for her. I went with them to the bottom of the stairs.

"I'm sorry about this," I said. "Something must have come over that cat. I'll make sure he doesn't bother you again."

"That's all right," Mary said. Then she blushed. "Thanks for pulling that cat away from me, even though you had to —to see me like that."

Aunt Rachel said good-night and Mary started up the stairs. Lydia remained with me.

"John, what was the matter with that cat?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Since we entered this house, you've acted as if you expected something to happen. Frankly, I've had a queer feeling all along. I thought it was because of the mustiness and quaintness of this house. Now I'm not so sure."

"Of course that's it," I said. "There's no reason to be uneasy. If it will make you feel better, I'll stay outside your door all night."

"You're a sweet boy, John. Don't trouble about us. Go to bed."

She kissed me on the mouth. We clung together for a moment, then she broke away and ran up the stairs.

I GOT a butcher knife from the kitchen and looked all through the house for Ichabod. My aunts and uncle had retired to their rooms. I couldn't find the cat anywhere. I went outside and walked around the house. I was around the front again when I saw the cat running between the pine trees. In the moonlight he looked as big as a jungle beast. There was no use going after him.

Making sure that the front and back doors were locked, I went up the staircase and sat down on the top step with my back against the wall. My right fingers were curled around the handle of the butcher knife. I hadn't any idea what I expected, but I wasn't taking any chances.

Time passed. I kept thinking of the vibrant loveliness of Lydia Poole when I had kissed her on the shore and again at the foot of the stairs. My head started drooping and I fought to keep awake by concentrating on Lydia's image. She was in my arms again, more desirable than any girl I had ever known, and somehow her clothes melted from her and I was holding a warm, nude body and it wasn't Lydia's body. It was Mary Butler, feeling and looking the way she had felt and looked in the bathroom.

The transition seemed right and natural. Lydia had vanished, had ceased to exist. It was Mary's voluptuousness I desired to embrace, to possess utterly. I wanted to crush her against me until I hurt her. I wanted to sink my fingers into the soft resiliency of her warm living flesh until—

With a start I was awake. I sat up, rubbing sleep from my eyes. There wasn't a sound anywhere in the house. My heart was throbbing wildly and I could hardly breathe.

I sat there, knowing something was wrong and unable to decide what it was. I stood up, looking around carefully. Then I realized that the butcher knife was no longer in my hand. It wasn't on the floor or anywhere on the stairs. What in the world could have happened to it?

Abruptly I went cold all over. On the back of my right hand was a wet, sticky blob of blood. I stared at it with horror, then laughed inwardly with relief. Ichabod must have scratched me while I'd been pulling him off Mary. I took out

my handkerchief and wiped away the blood. My skin was smooth and unbroken.

Once again I groped wildly for an explanation. The blood must have come from the scratches on Mary. That satisfied me for about ten seconds—until I saw more smears of blood on my other hand and on my shirt. Mary's scratches hadn't bled enough to get that much blood on me. And why hadn't I noticed the blood on the back of my right hand when I had picked up the butcher knife earlier? It had been on the most conspicuous place of my body; I couldn't possibly have missed seeing it.

Then where in God's name had it come from? And where was the knife?

My head turned to the door to the two bedrooms in which the girls slept. I tried the door. It was locked, but like all the other rooms in the house, with a hook and eye. I got a comb from my pocket and slid it through the crack and pushed up the hook. Soundlessly I opened the door.

The light in the hall behind me revealed Lydia and Ida sleeping together in the bed. Mary was in the adjoining room. I went to it on tiptoe. I was halfway across the room when I heard a cat mewling.

I froze. The mewling sounded as if it came from the other side of the door to Mary's room.

With an effort I got a grip on myself and, legs so weak that they could scarcely carry my body, I continued forward. I gripped the knob and opened the door noiselessly.

Moonlight streaming in through the window shone fully on the bed. Mary Butler lay on her back, the jacket of her pajamas thrown open, and from between her naked breasts protruded the handle of the butcher knife. And crouching on Mary's face, with claws sunk into the skin, was Ichabod!

CHAPTER THREE

Return of the Madman

AS I stood transfixed in the doorway, I had a strange sensation that I was not yet awake, that this was still part of the dream. My legs, with a will of their own, carried me closer to the bed. Blood was still flowing from the wound, ran sluggishly down either side of the body and soaked into the bedsheet.

Ichabod's yellow eyes blazed at me. He was purring now with what seemed to me a note of triumph.

Abruptly electric light flooded the room. A girl screamed. Twisting my head, I saw Ida Kennedy standing in the doorway, her hand still on the light switch. Her other hand pointed at me as her screams rose higher and higher.

In the other room a voice cried: "Ida! My God, Ida, what's wrong?" And then Lydia also appeared in the bedroom.

She didn't scream, although her mouth was open. She leaned against the doorjamb, staring at me and at the cat and at the corpse.

"He killed her!" Ida shrilled. "He'll kill all of us!"

"Did you, John," Lydia said. Her voice was low and hoarse and she had difficulty getting it past her throat.

I didn't answer. It struck me that buried in my subconscious mind had been the knowledge that something like this would happen; that sooner or later, like Luke, I would murder in a frenzy of insane lust. It was because I had held Mary Butler naked in my arms that I had killed her. Otherwise it would have been Lydia into whose bosom the knife would now be lodged. I loved Lydia, but it had been Mary who had roused the greater lust in me.

"John!" Lydia cried. "Oh, my God, you couldn't have killed her!"

She was pleading with me to answer, to assure her that I was innocent. But

all I could do was stand there in a silent stupor.

I turned again to the bed. More horrible than the knife in Mary Butler's bosom was that huge cat still standing on her face. And it came to me that Ichabod was the embodiment of all the evil which had cursed the Weatherlys for nine generations.

A mad shriek tore from my throat as I hurled myself at the cat. Ichabod leaped off the other side of the bed and I fell forward on top of the corpse. When I got to my feet again, I saw the reddish body streak through the door. I plunged after it. Ida and Lydia shrank out of my way as I passed them. By the time I reached the head of the stairs, the cat was nowhere in sight.

In the bedroom Ida shrieked: "Let's get out of here before he kills us too."

I returned to the first bedroom. Ida was snatching up her clothes from a chair.

"Wait," I said. "I don't know whether or not I killed her. Maybe—"

"Keep away from me!" she burst out hysterically. "Don't come near me."

"I won't hurt you," I said. "I just want to ask you a question. Did you hear anything? The only way to get into that other bedroom is through here. There's a possibility—"

She hadn't heard a word I said. Her eyes grew larger and larger with terror as she stared at me.

"You're going to kill me!" she cried. "I can see it in your face. You're mad!"

PANIC overwhelmed her. I had moved to the side of the door, and she saw an opening for escape and ran past me. I threw out my arms to stop her. That only heightened her conviction that I meant to kill her. My fingers closed over her nightgown; she threw herself forward. Fabric ripped, and she raced on.

"Wait," I called down to her as she flew down the stairs. "You're not dressed. And you can have my car to leave."

"Ida!" Lydia appeared at my side. "You can't run out like that."

The back door slammed and she was outside the house, clad only in a torn nightgown.

I turned to Lydia. She was small and lovely in her blue sleeping pajamas and with her golden hair tumbling down her shoulders. She cringed away from me, but made no attempt to flee.

"I thought I loved you," she muttered more to herself than to me. "I loved a killer, a madman! Now I know why you didn't want us to stay here. You know that there's a mad killer streak in you."

I swung around and looked down the stairs at the back door through which Ida had gone. I'd locked it on the spring lock, but she hadn't paused to fumble with it. She'd simply pulled that door open and run out. Somebody must have unlocked the door.

"Perhaps I didn't kill her," I said to Lydia. "I don't know. I was guarding your door and I fell asleep. I had that knife as a weapon. When I awoke, it was gone and I found that it had killed Mary."

"Then who did? Your uncle or one of your aunts? That would be nearly as bad."

"Yes," I said. "It would be."

"John? Are you up there?"

Aunt Rachel and Aunt Cora appeared at the foot of the stairs. Both had faded bathrobes over their night clothes.

"We heard someone scream," Aunt Cora panted as she pulled herself up the stairs. "I told Rachel that one of the girls was having a nightmare, but Rachel made me get up because—" She broke off and look frightened. "It was just a nightmare, wasn't it, John?"

"No," I said tightly. "Mary Butler is dead. We found her in bed with a knife in her."

Both women became motionless. Aunt Cora turned to look down at Aunt Rachel who was several steps below her.

"It's a lie!" Aunt Cora cried. "I don't believe it."

"We were fools, Cora," Rachel replied. "God will never forgive us."

"What are you talking about?" I demanded.

Aunt Cora swayed against the banister, her back to me. Aunt Rachel's thin, wrinkled face was like a death-mask as she turned it up toward me.

"You should know, John," Aunt Rachel said. "I was against it; Edward and Cora insisted. This morning—"

A thin scream interrupted her. It came from a distance outside of the house, from the dunes.

"It's Ida!" Lydia exclaimed.

I started down the stairs, brushed past my aunt and went through the back door. The scream was repeated once more, and then, as I raced toward the shore, there was dead silence.

INSTINCT rather than reason took me directly toward the place where once I had seen the dead white body of Hattie Saunders. And when I reached the spot, time seemed to have turned back five years, and once again I saw a naked dead girl on the beach and my cousin Luke standing over her.

He looked up and saw me and started to run along the shore. I went after him, but horror robbed my legs of strength and I soon lost him among the pines. As I retraced my steps to the body, I was panting so hard that I thought my lungs would burst.

Where five years ago Hattie Saunders had lain on the beach, Ida Kennedy lay now. Her dead, horror-filled eyes stared up at the moon which rode over Cape Cod Bay. Nearby a tatter of material lay on the beach—all that was left of her nightgown. No weapon had been used on her. The contorted position of her frail body and the unnatural angle her head lay on her shoulders showed that she had met death by the bare hands of a lust-crazed madman.

I raised my eyes and a low shadow flitted across the ribbon of moonlight. Ichabod was once again at the scene of violent death, and he was headed for the cottage where Lydia and the three old people were unprotected. On the way back to the house, I kept my eyes peeled for the cat, but he had vanished.

Lydia and my two aunts were huddled in the little back foyer, watching me approach through the open back door. Lydia had only to look at my face to know what had happened to her friend.

"She's dead!" Lydia wailed. "She's been murdered too!"

I leaped forward to catch her as she swayed. She buried her face against my chest and sobbed.

"Did Luke kill her?" Aunt Rachel asked in a thin, almost lifeless voice.

"Yes," I said. "Couldn't you see what you were doing when you let him stay here? It was better for him and for everybody else that he remain where he was."

There was sorrow rather than anger in my voice. They were like children who had no understanding of the enormity of their action.

Aunt Cora simply stood there with her plump hands folded in front of her, the lines of her face formless and dazed. I knew now the secret knowledge she and Uncle Edward had shared: they had thought themselves very clever, in the manner of children, in keeping from me the fact that Luke was in his room.

Where, by the way, was Uncle Edward? Had he slept through it all?

"Luke came this morning," Aunt Rachel muttered. "He had escaped from that dreadful place and asked us to hide him. We couldn't turn him away. He is a

Weatherly. We have to take care of our own."

There was no use in further talk with them. I said to Lydia: "You're getting dressed at once and taking my car and driving away from here."

Listlessly she nodded. Together we went up to the bedroom. I shut the door to the room in which the body of Mary Butler lay and then turned my back to Lydia while she dressed. I would stay close to her side until she was well away from this house of doom.

No words passed between us until we reached my car. I stuck the key into the ignition lock and she slid behind the wheel.

"Follow this road until you come to the highway," I told her. "Turn right. Find a place to stay for the night, but be sure it's far enough away from here."

"And you're going to stay here?"

"My place is here," I said.

She reached out a hand to me. "I'll come back in the morning."

"No," I said. "Never come back again. Continue on to Boston."

"You'll come to see me there?" She gave me her address. "You'll have to, John, in order to get your car back, if for no other reason."

"All right," I said, telling myself at the same time that I would never see her again. I had no right to. I would send somebody else for the car.

SHE opened the door and leaned toward me and as we kissed my heart wept. Then she stepped on the starter. I stood looking after the car.

"John!"

Luke stood behind me. He must have been standing there during my conversation with Lydia, watching her. I stepped toward him, my hands fisting, murder in my heart.

"John! Wait! I didn't kill that girl."

The last time I had looked into his eyes they had been those of a madman. Now there was only sadness and pain in them. He was two or three years younger than I, but he looked twice my age. His hair was grey, his face lined, and there was no flesh left on his bones.

"I ran away when I saw you because I thought you'd take me back to that hell," he said. "I can't stand it there; I can't breathe there. And sometimes there was that cursed straitjacket. John, a while ago I heard somebody scream, and when I reached the bay I saw that dead girl."

"What were you doing outside the house?"

"I needed air. That bedroom was like my cell, closed in. John, I didn't mean to kill Hattie Saunders. We were walking on the shore and suddenly the first of the pains started in my head. She was so white and lovely. I put my hands on her and—and—" His fingers pressed against his temples. "Something possessed me that wasn't myself. It brought the pain in my head. Every now and then the thing comes and with it the pain. It's awful, John. It makes me do anything it wants to, and it's evil. I try to drive it out and I can't."

I stood very still, studying every change in his expression.

"Did you have that pain tonight?"

He shook his head. "I know what I'm doing when the pain comes, but I can't help it. The pain didn't come tonight. That girl on the beach, I never saw her before. She lay there so white and beautiful. All naked, like Hattie." His slack mouth twisted. "John, did a beautiful girl ever squirm and shriek in your arms? Their flesh is so tender, so soft as your fingers sink into it."

I gripped his arm. "Luke, did you kill her?"

"Kill?" He pulled away from me and buried his face in his hands. "The pain! It's coming again! I can't stand it!"

He tore away his hands and I saw that his face had changed. His features were crumpling into a loose, contorted mass. The fires of hell burned in his eyes.

"You want to take me back to that place!" he shrieked. "I won't let you!" And he started to run.

I didn't go after him. Tomorrow the authorities would come for him. The important thing was that Lydia was far enough away to be safe.

And then I saw the car. Through a break in the pines I saw it standing where the narrow road curved.

A tremendous weight lay on my shoulders as I raced toward it. Desperately I told myself that it must be another sedan —until I reached it and saw that it was mine. The motor was still running, and the front left door was wide open. Lydia was not there.

On the driver's seat crouched the huge red body of Ichabod, his evil yellow eyes blazing hatred at me.

CHAPTER FOUR

Heritage of Horror

SNARLING, the cat flew at me. I jerked my arms up in time to protect my face. Claws hooked into my sleeve; then the cat dropped to the ground and streaked away.

As I stood there at the side of the empty car, I made an effort to push aside the chaos of horror which filled my brain and allow rational thought to come through. Luke might have lied about being innocent of the murder of Ida Kennedy, but it didn't seem likely. He had not denied having caused the death of Mary Butler; hadn't even mentioned it, which probably meant that he knew nothing about it. And the fact remained that he could not conceivably have abducted Lydia from the car.

Somebody else was the killer. Somebody whom Lydia knew well enough to trust when she had seen him standing here on the road. He had waved to her to stop and before she had been able to utter a sound, she had been knocked out —or killed!

I recalled that I hadn't seen Uncle Edward since he had gone to bed at the same time as the others. The screams of Ida Kennedy when she had seen Mary Butler's body had roused my two aunts whose rooms were on either side of his, but, apparently, they hadn't awakened him. That didn't make sense.

I hurried back to the cottage and went straight to Uncle Edward's room. His bed was empty—hadn't, in fact, been slept in at all. My teeth clenched. So now it was Uncle Edward who, cursed by the family heritage of degeneracy, was a maniacal killer! Somewhere nearby he had already murdered Lydia, or was about to.

I slammed out of his room, ran toward the front of the house. In the living room I saw the spot on the carpet. Its significance didn't penetrate through to my brain until I was out in the front hall. Then I came back and bent over it. The spot was red and still wet. Fresh blood which had soaked into the carpet!

A little further on there was another ragged splotch of blood, and from there it ran in parallel wavy lines clear across to the other end of the room. And it disappeared under the door of my bedroom.

I flung the door open and snapped on the light. Uncle Edward lay face down on the bed. The pillow on which his face rested was soaked with blood.

There wasn't much left to the top of his head. The skull had been split open by a heavy weight. He had been killed in the other room and dragged in here and placed on my bed. The other bedrooms were in back of the house and none of us had passed through the living room

where we would have seen the blood. He had been dragged in here because the murderer, probably, had foolishly thought that the presence of the corpse in my bed would pin the crime on me. The murderer had acted with more sense, from his point of view, when he had stepped past my sleeping form at the head of the stairs and taken the knife from me and then smeared some of the blood on my hands and clothes.

Uncle Edward had been old and wizened and thin. His weight could easily have been carried by a man. Why, then, had his corpse been *dragged,* leaving the bloody trail!

The thought numbed me. Because it had been a woman who had killed him? A woman whom Lydia knew well enough to stop the car for?

I TURNED to leave the room, and there in the doorway stood Ichabod. Once more I saw in those malevolent yellow eyes an expression which was one of almost human triumph.

I flung myself at the cat and caught him. Again he had come to gloat over murder, and in my fury I was convinced that he epitomized all the accumulated evil which had plagued the Weatherlys for three hundred years. Spitting, he raked his claws at me, used his sharp teeth on my hands and arms, but grimly I held on, tightening my fingers about his throat.

And when at last I dropped that huge red body, my hands were in ribbons and my face and chest were bleeding from a score of scratches. I didn't care. Ichabod was dead.

I staggered to Aunt Rachel's room and pushed the door in. Aunt Cora was with her, and they were both sitting up, evidently too overwrought to stay alone in their rooms or to sleep.

"John, you're bleeding!" Aunt Rachel exclaimed.

"It's nothing," I said. "I scratched myself. Were either of you out of the house since I left you?"

Aunt Cora shook her head. "We were here all the time."

I left, closing the door after me. Fool!

Statement of ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Act of Congress of March 3, 1933, of Horror Stories, published bi-monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1939. State of New York, county of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Harold S. Goldsmith, who having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of the Horror Stories, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 411, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. Managing Editor, none. Business Manager, Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y., Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y., Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: none. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner, and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest, direct or indirect, in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. Harold S. Goldsmith, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 10th day of October, 1939. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, New York County Clerk's No. 20, Register's No. 0-W-49. (My commission expires March 30, 1940.) [Seal]—Form 3526—Ed. 1933.

I had been wasting time killing Ichabod and wondering about who the fiend was when all that mattered was that I find Lydia. It might not yet be too late.

I went through every part of the house. Then I was outside again, cursing myself for not having started the search in the area immediately around the car. I ran like mad.

By the time I reached my car, I was pretty well exhausted. Ichabod's claws had done more damage than I had thought, and the blood wouldn't stop flowing. I moved in a circle through the pines, pausing every now and then to listen. Once I thought I heard a muffled moan, but it was cut off before I could locate the direction from which it came. I hadn't a flashlight and among the trees, where the moonlight could not penetrate, I was practically blind. Yet I stumbled on, sobs of despair and exhaustion rasping from my lungs.

I didn't see the attack when it came. I hardly heard more than a whisper of sound behind me. Then, before I could turn halfway around, a club descended on my head.

The blow missed my skull and glanced off the top of my spine. I dropped to my knees, pawing the air in a frantic attempt to regain my feet. The club came down again, this time clipping me behind the left ear. The lack of light spoiled my attacker's aim, else my head might have been crushed in like Uncle Edward's. But the two blows were sufficient to send me sprawling face downward on the ground and to paralyze my muscles.

I lay on the border of unconsciousness. Remotely and impersonally I felt hands fumble at my wrists and ankles; then I was being dragged by my feet. The rough ground added cuts and scratches to the claw wounds in my face, and dirt was ground into the raw, bleeding flesh. I was a mass of weary agonized nerves.

AT LONG last my feet were dropped and I lay still. Slowly the strength to lift my head came back to me. I found myself looking at water only a few feet away and at a ribbon of moonlight that was so near it seemed I had only to stretch out my hands to touch it. Far away I say a tiny white splotch on the shore of the bay: the body of Ida Kennedy still lying where I had last seen it.

Or could it be Lydia?

With an effort I turned on my side. No, Lydia was here, only ten feet away —still alive and unhurt, but it would have been better had she been dead like Ida and Mary. Because the horror was only beginning for her.

Her clothes had been torn from her body, and they lay scattered about her. Handcuffs fastened her wrists and ankles, and her mouth was distended by a gag. She was sitting up, bowed so far over that her lovely breasts pointed at her knees and swayed with the trembling of her body. Her eyes were pits of terror.

I tried to get up. Like Lydia I couldn't raise to more than a sitting position, and for the same reason. Handcuffs secured my wrists and ankles.

A man was standing with his back toward me. Although I could not see his eyes, I could imagine them gloating down at Lydia's nakedness. He was small and short, with not enough strength to have carried Uncle Edward's corpse into my bedroom instead of dragging him. And it must have exhausted him to have pulled me all this distance.

"Colonel Saunders!" I cried incredulously.

He turned to me. Something inhuman had come into his weak eyes, and the lines of his face had shifted into a mask of insanity. He laughed in a way I had heard only one other person laugh before—Luke, when he had stood over the corpse of the girl he had slain five years ago.

Without a word he again twisted his head toward Lydia. "You can scream now," he chuckled. "There's nobody to hear you but those two old women in the house and they can't do anything. Nobody to hear but myself and John." He tore the rag from her mouth. "Scream now, my pretty. Let your terror tear from your throat so that John and I may hear."

"Please!" she wailed. "I never harmed you."

"No, but you are very beautiful," Colonel Saunders said. "More beautiful than that first girl between whose breasts I plunged John's knife." He laughed. "I smeared blood on John. He must have thought that he killed her. Now he knows better. And the second girl—you can see her there, that white spot. She fought, and that was more pleasant. She fought the way Hattie must have fought against Luke and"—his voice dropped to a whisper—"she died the same way."

"Colonel Saunders!" I shouted desperately. "Listen to me. You want vengeance on the Weatherlys because Luke killed Hattie. This girl isn't a Weatherly. She's a stranger. Let her go. Take out your vengeance on me. Don't hurt her!"

HE TUGGED at the ends of his drooping mustache and smiled craftily. "Five years I waited. Five long years of loneliness. Hattie wasn't with me to comfort me; she had been taken from me by the Weatherlys. The cursed Weatherlys who had brought nothing but evil to themselves and others. I could have killed them, but that would have been too easy an end for them. I had to kill Edward because he saw me in the house, and now I'll have to kill you, John. Living, you might have suffered more, the way Luke is suffering now. I hadn't planned to kill any of you—only the girls—but maybe this way is better. When I'm finished with this girl, I'll shoot you and say I came while you were attacking her. The Weatherly name will be doubly damned forever. They'll say you went mad like Luke and the others, and Rachel and Cora, all that are left of the Weatherlys, will waste away, and your cursed family will die off the face of the earth."

"But this girl is innocent!" I protested.

"She's beautiful," he gloated. "I've been lonely."

He stooped down at her side and hooked the fingers of his left hand into her disheveled golden hair and jerked her head back. Then he raked the nails of his right hand across her flesh, leaving thin lines of blood.

She screamed, then, and thrashed her body about and tried hopelessly to rise to her feet. And I screamed too and started to hobble toward him on my knees.

I was halfway to him when he saw me coming. A compact little automatic had appeared in his hand.

"Stay where you are, John. I can shoot you now as well as later."

I became motionless. If I were dead, there would not be the remotest hope of saving Lydia. Not, I thought bitterly, that I could do anything while I lived.

And then I saw my cousin Luke come along the shore of the bay.

He walked rapidly, his head thrust out at an angle from his body as he looked at us. Colonel Saunders wasn't aware of his presence until Luke wasn't more than thirty or forty feet away.

Then Colonel Saunders' jaw sagged and he gaped at Luke as if he were looking at a ghost. It was plain at once that he hadn't known of Luke's escape and presence in the house.

"Luke!" I cried. "Colonel Saunders is trying to kill us!"

Luke paused, his eyes darting from me to Colonel Saunders and then stopped at Lydia. His tongue flicked out over his

lips. I prayed that this would be one of his periods of sanity.

And then I saw how Luke was staring at Lydia and I knew that we were doomed. At the sight of her glorious nudity, he forgot Colonel Saunders or myself. His features contorting with mad lust, he started toward her.

"Stay back!" Colonel Saunders shrilled.

Luke ignored him. And Colonel Saunders' gun spoke. Luke's body jerked and he turned to Colonel Saunders with a pained, puzzled expression.

"That's for Hattie!" Colonel Saunders laughed crazily, and he kept shooting.

Somehow I managed to rise to my feet, and with all the remaining strength at my command I hobbled toward Colonel Saunders, who kept laughing and pumping bullets into the now lifeless body of Luke. He continued to squeeze the trigger after the gun was empty.

By that time I was on him. I spread my elbows and dropped my arms over his head. I squeezed, jamming the handcuffs against his throat.

Weak as I was, I was still stronger than he, and I had the advantage of surprise. He squirmed and thrashed and kicked, and then slowly he sank to my feet. I held on for some time after he was dead.

I got the key from his pocket and unlocked the handcuffs from myself and Lydia. She sank into my arms in a dead faint. Tenderly I carried her to the house. . . .

Colonel Saunders had turned mad, of course. Brooding over vengeance, the police said. Perhaps. But something that Aunt Rachel said the next day stayed forever in my mind.

"Colonel Saunders?" she muttered in bewilderment. "Why should he want to harm the Weatherlys? He was one himself. He was my cousin, John; your second cousin. I can't understand it.

Colonel Saunders a Weatherly! I hadn't thought of it before because there had been so much intermarriage in the community that a distant relationship with anybody was more or less taken for granted. Aunt Rachel couldn't understand it, but I could. The evil blood of the Weatherlys cropping out once more!

God knows that I shouldn't have married Lydia. She scoffed at my fears, showed me medical documents to disprove the inheritance of evil traits. It wasn't her arguments so much as her loveliness which finally caused me to weaken.

She is utterly happy, and I suppose I would be too if it weren't for the cancer of fear gnawing away at me. Sometimes, when I look at her beauty, I remember how Luke had once loved a girl and what he had done to her.

But no, I must not think of that. I must take what happiness has been given to me, and pray and hope.

THE END

QUESTION
Which are the only cough drops containing Vitamin A?
(CAROTENE)
ANSWER

Flesh for the Goat-Man

A Novelette by DONALD DALE

The Goat-Man's victims died in horrible agony from the blazing halo that seared their skulls and scorched their quivering brains. But lovely Virginia Emptage was marked not for death but for love—and Bruce Shanlon was powerless while the lascivious Satyr bent over her drug-inflamed, naked body!

While hell's weird halo surrounded the valley, the man-monster made merry sport with the Hotel's doomed guests. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Skullcap of Flame

THE happy, off-key song died on her lips. Her clear, blue eyes dilated to immense circles of terror. She thrust her arms before her face, as if trying to ward off a blow. She retreated, stumbling backwards in the leaves that strew the little path through the mesquite and scrub cedar atop the hills that encircled Miracle Valley. And then her heel caught on a stone and she fell down.

The cry of terror that, arrested, had almost split her lungs, now rent the air. The girl cowered and cringed, but she could not lower her eyes from the Thing —that leering, murderous monster, half man, half beast—that stood over her, a wet, gurgling chuckle purling from its throat.

That beast-man stood over the girl for a moment, his blood-shot eyes, full of evil, gloating over her; his scraggly grey beard twitching while he moved his sunken lips as if savoring a tasty morsel.

As Mary Stone stared up at him, hypnoticed by terror, her whole life, like that of a drowning man flashed through her mind. She thought of the long, hard years, and of this pleasant job of waiting tables at Miracle Inn which had at last come her way. But most clearly of all, she thought of her sweetheart, John Fort, the driver of the bus that came daily, bringing the sick and the city-weary to find peace here. And Virginia Emptage, owner of this new health-resort, her "boss" whom she adored.

The Thing stopped and ran his gnarled, yellowed hands along the firm young curves of Mary Stone's body. Then, with lingering regretfulness, withdrew them. Then, with a weird, cabalistic gesture, he described a circle around the crown of her head with his long, bony finger. He arose, poked her with his hoof—a huge, cloven hoof—and chuckling once more, was gone. . . .

DOWN in the valley, the rocking-chair brigade sat in the glassed-in pavilion of Virginia Emptage's new resort, knitting, reading, eating candy, drinking the mineral water that fresh young attendants in white and blue uniforms always left on the little tables near their elbows.

From her office desk Virginia watched them, tears of happiness brightening her violet eyes. Bruce Shanlon left the neat cubicle, marked "Manager," and came over to her. "Well, Jenks darling, we put it over, didn't we?"

"We? What do you mean *we?* I would have had to close-up in a week if you hadn't come along," she protested.

"Nuts" he said fondly, and went back to his post, leaving her to glow over the happy turn of business represented by the bevy of happy, chatting women, and the quiet, elderly men.

She couldn't hear what they were saying, but she would not have been disturbed if she could have, for they were only recounting an old folk-yarn that could have been matched by any isolated community. The one of this locale was no stupider, no better than any other. Having tired of talking of the "folks back home", her guests had drifted somehow to the ugly, ancient superstition of the old "Goat-man of the Hill" who had allegedly cast a blight on this valley, making it unprofitable for farming or stock-raising.

"Nonsense!" snorted Miss Mabel Storm, superannuated librarian from Wilmot College.

"It's such a hideous story," twittered timid little Mrs. Booker. "I wish I had never heard it."

"I think it's cute," giggled chubby Mrs. North.

It was at that moment that Mary Stone hurtled through the revolving door of the pavilion, screaming and weeping, hands wildly clasping the top of her head. In a frenzy of fear, she fell to the floor sobbing violently. "He touched me! His feet were. . ."

Everyone crowded around her—the guests, the uniformed attendants, Lew Kent, the blond boy at the water bar. And Jenks Emptage, when she took the terrified girl in her arms and tried to comfort her, could not keep from noting the apprehensive glances and the gossipy whisperings of the rocking-chair brigade. This girl, who had worked her heart out building up this business, knew it could be blown down with one breath of unpleasantness. Even by this wild story of the waitress.

Before Bruce Shanlon could fetch Old Dr. Sam Norton, young Dr. Weldon Espee was pushing his way into the crowd. But, as soon as the young doctor caught sight of old Dr. Sam, he stepped back quickly as if he had been slapped, his handsome face darkening.

Benevolent-looking Dr. Sam kneeled down to the floor and cradled the sobbing girl in his fat arms. "Don't take on so, honey. Nothing's going to harm you."

"But," the girl shrieked, "the blue flame! He traced the circle around my head!"

"You've been hearing too many tales," the old doctor clucked, "now just open your mouth and swallow this down and you'll be—"

The ladies were settling again in their rockers, nervously, but agreeing with Dr. Sam that the girl had heard the ugly legend too often. "I told you we shouldn't talk about such things," Mrs. Booker fluttered. "They frighten young people. I think—"

The woman's words died out. She stood open-mouthed and stared at the strange figure that had come into the pavilion and was hobbling swiftly toward the nucleus of people in the center of the room. And as she gazed she knew, somehow, that a second wave of terror was washing close upon the ebb of the first, and she wondered if her weak heart could endure it.

Jenk's glance, along with that of the others crowding around, followed the woman's terrified eyes. Then Jenks exhaled her relief, for it was only old Aunt Susan Gorth, who lived alone in a little shack in the foothills and occasionally brought in a few vegetables for sale. She had never before ventured farther than the kitchen door, but she was quite harmless.

The old woman was now in their midst, glaring at those who cowered fearfully away from her, looking down upon Old Dr. Sam and the girl in his arms, shoving away, with an insistent gesture, Jenks who was moving to meet her. "The Old Goat-man!" her voice rolled hollowly from beneath her dirty bonnet. "He's on the prod again!" Her bony work-hardened hand swept an inclusive gesture over all of them. "He'll wipe y'all out! Every one of you!"

"Don't be silly, Aunt Susan." It was Jenks again, trying to quiet the strange old woman. "You're excited. You know that—"

"Listen!" she shouted.

At the old woman's cry, the air was suddenly filled with a deep, satanic rumbling. It seemed to come from outdoors, emanating from all sides, hemming them in.

"Look!"

They gathered behind the old hag as she stood at the glass wall, pointing outward. Fear clamped upon every heart, for now they could no longer deny that something beyond their ken was happening in the hills that ringed in Miracle Springs—the hills that the legendary Goat-man claimed for his own! To the hellish rumbling that had assaulted their ears was added now the undeniable evidence that met their sight.

Bruce Shanlon broke away from the crowd and raced outdoors, Jenks Emptage right behind him. His strong arm steadying her, they turned slowly, fearfully, and looked all around into the fast deepening twilight.

They were completely hemmed in by the devil's own circle!

Leaping and licking, a wall of flame crowned the rim of hills that enclosed them. A hellish blue it was—the blue flame, the Goat-man's blue circle of brimstone!

They were trapped in this valley!

BRUCE SHANLON did not let Jenks Emptage rush back into that chattering, hysterical mob, but held her there in the crook of his arm, while he struggled desperately for something to say. At last it came. "We've been awfully stupid, Jenks, letting the excitement of two ignorant people communicate itself to us. See here, this can't be anything but a peculiar sort of electrical storm." His voice warmed, and he realized happily that he had convinced himself. "Look, darling! It's already going away."

With this common-sense thought, they went inside and soon had all the guests

seemingly quiet. By the time John Fort came in with the bus, bringing eight more guests seeking peace and health at these mineral springs, everything seemed almost normal. And Jenks was determined not to let a foolish superstition destroy this resort which her father had worked himself into the grave trying to establish.

Only Mrs. North and two of her friends wanted to leave immediately, but Fort said stubbornly that they'd have to wait for the morning bus. And the few people who had come to Miracle Springs in their own automobiles seemed to have no liking for driving over the hillroad in the darkness to humor three frightened women. So nobody left, but Jenks knew that anything could happen. Health-resorters were impressionable, she thought. If anything else should happen—

But nothing else would, she insisted to herself over and over. Still, after she was undressed and in bed, she was restless; feeling somehow that some horrible menace hung about this place—the new five-story inn, with its barber-shop, beauty-parlor, dining-room; the adjoining drinking-pavilion with its shining marble water-fountain; the swimming-pool; the little flower garden—everything that made up her hopes and her obligation to carry on her dead father's efforts. Something malignant seemed to brood over it, hover about it, yes—encircle it! With the devil's circle of flame!

And though she knew such thoughts were absurd, they brought her mind to her little waitress, Mary Stone, who had heard so much of the "Old Goat-man of the Hills" that she had let her nerves go to pieces. Jenks decided she should go down and see if the girl was getting any sleep.

Down the dimly-lighted back stairs to the spick-and-span servant quarters, she went. Listening for a moment outside the room and hearing no sound, she opened the door softly, went in, and started across to the girl's bed. And then she drew back, hand tight upon her mouth, stifling the cry of terror that rose to her lips.

She never knew how long she stood there, the tide of fear rising in her, washing over her slender body, rocking it like an aspen in a storm. It could have taken eons or just one second for the sight that held her eyes to sear her brain to an agonizing crisp. Around the crown of Mary Stone's head was an encircling light! A blue flame!

The girl had told the truth! She *had* seen the Goat-man and he had bound her head with a blue circle of brimstone!

Yes, the girl had told the truth. So had Aunt Susan! The Goat-man, the Devil's own viceroy, was rampant in Miracle Valley!

CHAPTER TWO

Crowned for Destruction

THE next thing Virgina Emptage knew she was tearing up the three flights of stairs to Bruce Shanlon's room, forgetting all about the little elevator with its sleepy operator. Frantically, she pounced on his door, and the next moment Bruce, in hastily-donned robe and slippers, was holding her in his arms, trying to quiet her, endeavoring to get some coherent words from her.

Finally, when he had understood the esentials of her wild story, he chided her gently. "You mustn't, my darling," he insisted, "Don't let the unpleasant happenings of this afternoon prey upon your mind. You went into Mary's room determined to see something, and of course—But let's go down there together. I want to show you how foolish you are."

In order not to arouse comment from the elevator boy, they once more took the stairs. Every step down those three flights brought Jenks nearer to abject, unbearable terror. She knew! This time she knew, *for she had seen it!*

But Bruce rallied her on, and when finally he shoved open Mary Shanlon's door to reveal nothing but a soft, peaceful darkness, he whispered happily, "See! What did I tell you! Little fraidy-cat! Mary's sleeping peacefully under the sedative Dr. Sam gave her."

"Listen!" Jenks breathed.

Together they held their breaths, Bruce surrendering for the instant to her whispered monition. And they heard—nothing! Nothing! Not even the sound of Mary's breathing.

"Turn on the light, Bruce," Jenks rasped.

With her still clinging to his arm, he stepped over and pulled the chain of the dresser-lamp. The light sprang out, flooding the bed—*and the thing that lay upon it!*

It was Mary Stone all right. That is, it was what was left of Mary Stone after the demon of the hills had laid his hand upon her.

"It doesn't make sense!" Shanlon heard himself croaking. No, no sense except that it was the mutilation that the Goat-man from Hell had put upon his victims from time immemorial. Shanlon couldn't even make a comforting gesture toward Jenks, for his whole being—all his mind and soul—was seized with the horror of the thing he was looking upon.

A girl, Mary Stone, with the top of her head gone—clean, down even with the eyebrows! Fascinated, Shanlon took a step nearer, peering. No, not sliced off with a cleaver, not blown off with a gun. But eaten—consumed away by some powerful agency. Leaving a flattened exposure of brains, scorched to a crisp!

THE next morning, Jenks Emptage, white and wan, had not been in her office a half-hour before ten or twelve people had drifted in. She had called no meeting, for she would not have known what to say or what to ask of them. But now she looked at the circle of fine, loyal friends volunteering comfort and aid, and her huge violet eyes filled with tears of gratitude.

Bruce Shanlon was there, of course. Bruce, the young advertising specialist who had come to Miracle Wells for a rest and had stayed to help a girl who was fighting so bravely to put over a business too big for her, and then had fallen in love with her, would never leave until she did.

Old Dr. Sam Norton, who had come soon after Jenk's father had bought, with the heritage he had brought from his native England, this little, dry, hill-encircled valley, which the scattering neighbors declared was "fitten fer nothin' but goats and darn few of them." Emptage had analyzed the queer-tasting water which welled there, and named mineral fountain Miracle Springs, dreaming Utopian dreams of a popular resort where people could come and find health and peace. And he was just beginning to make it pay a little when he died. Old Dr. Sam seemed very dear to Jenks.

Then, there was young Dr. Weldon Espee, handsome, brilliant, and already owner of a fair practice. Jenks knew of no reason for the brooding look on his smooth dark face, except that he was in love with her and wished he were standing in Bruce's place to help her.

Homer Kray, a large, striking-looking man of about forty, had come a number of weeks ago offering to buy Jenks' holdings, saying that he thought this little cup of a valley with its fine mineral springs was just what he wanted for experimenting with a new breed of goats. When she had convinced him that she was here to stay, he had declared he did not blame her, and had himself stayed on, enjoying the peace of the place.

Besides these, there was slender, blonde Lew Kent, the water-counter attendant, whom Bruce had brought from behind a soda-fountain in New York.

And stalwart John Fort, the dead Mary Stone's sweetheart, pale under his tan, hardly hearing the murmured condolences of gentle, slow-witted Arthur Cook, the Springs' barber.

Jenks knew they were waiting for her to speak, and there was only one thing she could say—one heart-breaking thing. "We'll have to tell the people about it," she said. "We can't have them stay here and—and pretend there is no danger."

"I hope," came Kray's cool, almost amused voice, "that you don't believe any of that silly stuff."

Dr. Sam, glaring, beat Jenks to the reply. "That's beside the point, Kray. No matter what the cause, death has struck here, and it can strike again."

Jenks Emptage spoke from her desk of authority. "You are right, Dr. Sam. We can't endanger their lives. John, get the bus ready. They'll want to leave"—her voice almost choked on a sob—"as fast as possible when we tell them what happened."

"And you?" Young Espee spoke for the first time.

"I, Weldon? Why, I'm staying, of course," the girl answered decisively.

Tense silence held them for a moment, and then Shanlon's rich Irish voice broke it. "Of course, and I'll stay with her."

"Me, too, Miss Jenks." That was the barber, his face flushed with loyalty.

And all at once, an assenting babel broke out, and Jenks realized that everyone except Dr. Sam had spoken. Then he too said testily, "In that case, of course, I'll remain also."

Suddenly Lew Kent's boyish voice piped up, excitedly, enthusiastically. "Oh, Mr. Shanlon, it's lunch time now. Why don't you go in and talk to the people. Tell them what happened, but ask them to stay for Miss Jenks, tell them—"

And so, Bruce Shanlon went into the huge, shining refectory, and used his winning Irish tongue. He soothed their fears, reassured them with his own strength and courage, and soon a wave of enthusiasm swept the hall. Of course, they'd stay with Jenks!

When the bus left that afternoon, only three or four checked out and went away. The rest—ignoring, almost forgetting the rumbling threat, the demoniac circle of blue flame, the dead girl with the crown of her head consumed by the Devil's own halo—elected to stay in that little isolated cup of valley, to defy the hate of the Old Goat-man of the Hills!

THAT afternoon Bruce Shanlon drove out to make a tour of the encircling hills, and Aunt Susan Gorth rode with him as far as her tiny, unpainted shack. He couldn't get anything out of her beyond the reiterated mumbling that she "knowed what she knowed." Nor did he find anything suspicious among the stunted mesquite and scrub-cedar that covered the dry, rocky hills so sparsely.

When he returned at sundown, there was an air of hectic gayety about Miracle Inn. Chatter, ping-pong, tennis, swimming—more activity than the guests had ever before shown. It was as if they were trying to prove how much fun they were having. It continued through supper time, and afterwards, someone turned the radio to music, pushed the chairs back from the center of the pavilion, and many began to dance.

Jenks, in a deep alcove to the right of the water-bar, smiled tremulously at Bruce beside her, and murmured, "Isn't it wonderful?" Soon, Homer Kray drifted over to them, then young Dr. Espee, presently Arthur Cook, the barber, and before long Jenks noticed with a glow of appreciation that there had gathered in the alcove, like a bulwark around her, every person who had been with her in her office that morning. Everyone, that is, except Lew Kent, who was not at the bar at all since these were his hours off.

Everyone was quiet, subdued, but seemed gratified. Finally, Kray spoke, "Look at them. That's what an appeal to reason will do. I've always said that common sense will always—"

And then, so suddenly that it was like the Devil's magic, darkness!

Instantaneously, terror filled the pavilion. Screams, weeping, curses, noisy scrambling as if for escape. But to Jenks Emptage, these sounds had no existence, for to her there was nothing in this mad world but the insane, impossible thing she was seeing. There in the pitch-black alcove, gleamed heads encircled with blue flame!

Bruce! Cook! Dr. Sam! All of them! All? Suddenly, she realized that Kray's and Dr. Espee's faces and those of the guests were not lighted by the demoniac blue glare. Her hands flew wildly to her own soft, brown hair, and she dashed to confront the mirror behind the water fountain.

Yes! Her head was encircled with the demoniac blue flame!

Now all the others crowded up beside Jenks, desperately seeking the truth about themselves in the mirror. And in the ghastly patches of blue flame, they read their doom. . . .

AND then, the lights went up. Like people coming out of a nightmare, they stared at each other. There was nothing except the pallor of their faces and the terror in their eyes to give evidence of the hideous moment that had just passed.

"It's a trick!" snarled young Dr. Espee.

"Somebody's got to quiet the guests," snapped Old Dr. Sam and he started out where, weeping, groaning, pushing senselessly, they huddled like frightened sheep. Homer Kray followed him, speaking coolly and masterfully to the terrified women.

"I'm going down to the light-switches," Shanlon said gruffly; "Cook, you stay here with Jenks." He started off but, before he reached the door there was a hideous scream like agony rising from the fiery pit of hell. Like a soul in excruciating, unbearable pain. A boy's voice, from somewhere outside was shrieking, calling, trying to say something.

Jenks Emptage streaked across the room. But by the time she was outside on the broad portico, Shanlon was beside her. They did not have to search for the thing that was calling to them in agony and desperation. It stood out in the night only too clearly.

Running wildly toward them from the direction of the foot-hills was a slender, boyish figure—blond hair blazing with a skull-cap of blue flame!

Before they could get to him, he was at the steps, had fallen sprawling upon them. In a flash, the girl and the man were kneeling at his side, hearing the words that poured from his torture-twisted lips. "The Goat-man! I saw him! I found out! He's—" Lew Kent gave one last scream of agony, and was dead.

And then, somehow, the portico light was on. Virginia Emptage stared, head aching with desperate denial of what her eyes were seeing. Lew Kent, who that morning had with charming boyishness pledged his support and evidently had ventured out this evening trying to find out something for her safety, was dead. And, like Mary Stone, the cap of his skull was gone, exposing the scorched welter of brains within!

CHAPTER THREE

Into Hell's Night

FOR an hour or two Jenks Emptage and her few loyal supporters who kept their wits about them had no time for grief at the horrible death of Lew Kent. They had their hands full taking care of the terrified guests.

At first, the bevy of shrieking women

and men had started running, like a herd of stampeded cattle, away from the hotel. But, suddenly realizing that every step brought them nearer the malevolent hills, they surged back like a sweeping ebb-tide, to the place from which they had come, and huddled together in sobbing and moaning groups.

They must be sent away, of course, but the bus, having got a late start, was not yet back. While they were waiting for it, they packed, asked nervous questions, and made unreasonable demands. When the bus finally came, panic struck as it became clear that there might not be enough room for everyone.

At last, however, the few automobiles and the bus pulled out, with every inch of available space taken, and with passengers clinging all over the running-boards and bumpers. Desperately, the men had tried to get Jenks to go, but she had stubbornly refused. Then they, likewise, resisted her insistence that they go to safety. And so it was the same little loyal coterie which had been with her that morning that now stood beside the deserted inn and watched the heavily-overloaded autocade creep arduously up the hill-road.

"And now, Jenks dear, you must go to your room and get some rest," Shanlon ordered. "We men will lock up, and then take turns at watch. Tomorrow, John Fort will have sent help and we'll clear this thing up."

Shanlon took the first watch. He combed the building from top to bottom, giving closest attention to the cellar, the storerooms, the powerhouse, and such other places that might harbor trouble-makers. He found nothing. He circled the outside of the house, peering toward the rim of hills, but everything was quiet and motionless under a dark, moonless sky.

When young Dr. Espee reported for the second watch, Shanlon was dog-tired, but feeling much reassured. Before he went to bed, however, he decided to waive convention and go to Jenks' room. If she had not succeeded in sleeping, he wanted to try to hearten her.

Softly he went down the long, dim hallway to her room, and knocked gently on the door. When there was no answer, he smiled happily to know that she was sleeping, and turned away. But suddenly, a few steps away, something—a sort of premonitory instinct, born of the weirdness of the night—seized him and turned him around.

Calling himself a fool, he used his passkey on Jenks' door and, stepping inside, called her name. When there was no answer, his call rose to a shout. "Jenks!" Still there was no answer. With shaking fingers, he flipped on the light. And then all reason went out of him.

Her clothes—the little blue silk shirtwaist dress, the filmy stockings, the sheer underthings—lay neatly on a chair. The covers were turned back, the bed tumbled—she had undressed and got to bed. But she was there no longer! She was gone!

Shanlon leaped to the window which opened to the fire-escape. A sliver of lace—from Jenks' night-gown—was snagged upon the pointed side-latch of the window! And the curtain—the sight tore a wild sob from Shanlon's throat—showed a blighted circle where it had been *scorched!* A circle just about at the position where Jenks' head would have grazed it as some fiend dragged her from the room!

Jenks, crowned with Satan's circlet, had been borne out into the hellish night!

BRUCE SHANLON had judgment enough to know that, for the best chance to save the girl he loved, he should have help. Operating the little elevator himself, he went first to Kray's room. Kray, too, was gone! Down to the fourth floor to awaken old Dr. Sam. Nor was he there! To Arthur Cook's room. Gone!

Before he got to the main floor, how-

ever, he began to realize that the men might have become restless and gone down to keep Espee company. That was better; they would all be up and dressed. He burst into the lobby, calling out to them. There was no answer but the hollow reverberations of his own voice. He ran all over the place, calling, looking. No one answered. He was alone at Miracle Inn. Everybody was gone!

"Where? Where?" he wondered. "What could have happened to them?" And when, unwilling to delay any longer his search for Jenks, he ran outside and started for the hills, he stumbled over the unmistakable, gruesome answer. Sprawled upon the ground was the inert body of a man!

He did not need the angry glare of his flash to show him the cause of the victim's death. Only too well, he knew! The head was eaten off flat, even with the eye-brows, exposing a spongy, scorched section of brain. He needed the light only to discover which one of the men it was. Arthur Cook, the faithful, slow-witted barber, stared vacantly up at him.

That was the fate of all the faithful ones! And that would be the fate of Virginia Emptage—the girl he loved!

And then, his flash picked up something that made him feel that death—even a horrible death like Mary Stone's—would be a boon. Hoof-prints! Huge cloven hoofs! Now he knew that the girl he loved was in more horrible danger than the mind of man could conceive. For his eyes were seeing the tracks of the lecherous old Goat-man of the Hills! It was he who had been the murdering marauder, killing off Jenks' protectors! It was he who had Jenks in his unclean hands!

Playing the light along the ground, he could see the hoof-prints clearly. They seemed to strike out westward, and he set out in that direction in a run. But soon the soft dirt gave way to the valley grass and then to rocky upland, and no tracks could be found. But he had to go on.

As he ran on, alone in that little cup in the earth where death and corruption reigned, every breath like a red-hot flame in his lungs, the immensity of the universe began to over-power him. His loneliness and his impotence dwarfed him to nothingness. He was a tiny, microscopic bug scampering senselessly up a vast, unscaleable mountain-side. But he went on.

For somewhere up there was his beloved, in the lascivious grasp of that unspeakable man-beast. And after what seemed eons of stumbling over rocks, tripping over vines, being torn by mesquite thorns, he was almost at the top of the hill, westward of the inn. Calling aloud Jenks' name, he gathered all his strength and made a last spurt for the crest.

And then, once more that night, he was confronted with the unconquerable powers of the Evil One. For when he sprang toward the summit, a wall of flame—blue flame!—leaped up before him. Wildly, he whirled and looked all around. Once more, the whole valley was shut in with a licking, hungry wall of fire!

He started running along the line of flame, seeking frenziedly to find some way through. Stumbling, slipping, getting up again, running on, peering ahead. And then, once again within swift minutes, he stopped dead in his tracks. It was too much. Things were coming too fast.

These strange things he was seeing were too fantastic, too incredible. They could be born only of insane grief and despair. Things—creatures—he didn't even know what to call them—these giant, protoplasmic blobs that tottered on fantastically long, thin legs far into the heavens; their ghastly white, unstable bodies writhing and twisting; their queer faces grimacing grotesquely. It couldn't be! Such things did not exist!

HIS brain protesting, he ran on doggedly toward these giant amoeba-like organisms with grinning mouths and ogling

eyes that, towering hundreds of feet into the murky sky, were like a gelatinous concentration and embodiment of all the scabrous, diabolic evil and horror of the world.

They could have, his sanity protested, nothing to do with the old Goat-man who had brooded over these hills since the beginning— They didn't fit, didn't belong with that earthy, erotic old beast-man. Or did they? All he could do was to ignore the fierce pain of his flaming lungs and run toward them. *He must know,* must see closer what—

The earth gave way beneath him. He was slipping, down, down — Thorns scratched legs, rocks bruised body and smashed his face. He plunged down into the darkness, until at last with a suddenness that threatened to break all his bones, his fall came to a stop. Gingerly, he shook sense back into his aching head. With searing agony he picked himself up and looked around. . . .

He was in a small, rocky break in the hill. Evidently, while he ran, eyes glued to those monstrous Things of evil up there, he had stepped over the edge of it and had slipped all the way down. As his eyes began to get accustomed to the darkness, he could see a curious formation in the side of the chasm. Approaching, he made out what seemed an entrance to a prehistoric cave.

On a sudden hunch, he drew out his flash and turned it to the ground.

Yes! There they were! The tracks of the cloven hoofs! Here, here inside this beast-man's cave was—Jenks! At last he had found her!

And then, before he could straighten up, a thousand sensations simultaneously impinged themselves upon his senses. The glimpse of skinny, goat-haired legs—the flash of yellow, withered hand grasping a stone hand-ax—a wet, gurgling chuckle —pain thundering through his head—and then, blackness, nothingness. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Hell's Ante-Chamber

AFTER Bruce Shanlon, through sheer force of will, dragged himself back into full, aching consciousness, he saw that he was in a weird grotto of immense size that blazed with hellish-blue light. From almost every rough niche in the rocky walls, that satanic light which he had come so much to fear leaped and licked out at him, creating a sharp brilliance that stabbed painfully at his already tortured mind.

The demoniac flood of light revealed completely the horror of the place. It was a hole of desolation and death! A few low stones that might have been used for seats were grouped in front of a stone block against the far wall. It was an altar—to the Devil. In front of that unholy dais, a hole about three yards in circumference yawned blackly. The floor was strewn with bleached human bones.

But the thing that held Shanlon's horrified eyes was the tortured, mutilated body of a more recent victim. The head was leveled off to where the brimstone halo had sat on the brow. Scorched brains were spilled on the rocky floor around the hideously outraged face of young Dr. Weldon Espee! Espee whom Bruce had subconsciously suspected because he had been free of the fiery halo!

But once more, as had happened too often this mad day, Bruce was not given time to assimilate one horrifying mystery before another was thrust upon him. Suddenly there was a wet, gurgling chuckle and a clicking of hard hoofs on the stony floor.

The creature who moved into the arc of Shanlon's vision was incredible—weird, grotesque, ugly.... It had a malevolent, lecherous face with red-rimmed, cruel eyes; scaly lips were contorted in a hellish smile that revealed blackened, ragged

teeth; its head was as bald as a melon; and it had a dirty, snarled goatee beard. The shriveled, crooked torso was as old as evil itself. It walked on the twisted, hairy legs of a goat, stumping along on huge, cloven hoofs. At last, Shanlon himself was looking upon the unholy author of all his tragedy.

Still chuckling, the Thing walked over until it stood beside the pit in front of the altar. Making a strange genuflection, the man-beast stretched out his hand above the black hole. At his gesture, there came, from down deep in the bowels of the earth, an ever-rising rumble. And then, with a dull roar, the wire blanket that stretched over the pit bellied into the air above a geyser of slime and broken stone.

Like one beholding a weird, unearthly drama, Shanlon watched, completely subjugated by horror.

After the gesture over the pit, the filthy Goat-man removed the screen and clattered over to where lay the mutilated corpse of Weldon Espee. Reaching down, he grasped the dead man by the arm and dragged him toward the black hole and, using a clumsy, cloven foot—pushed him in!

Protest at last expressed itself in Shanlon. A hoarse cry ripped his throat, and he lunged forward with all the strength of his strong, young body. But as he was painfully jerked back, he discovered, for the first time since awesome incredulity had held him spellbound, that he was tied, hand and foot. He saw now that his feet were held with torn strips of smooth, buckskin-strong silk, and he knew, by the slick, cruel cutting at his wrists, that his hands had the same kind of bonds. They bit cruelly into his flesh when he struggled. They were unyielding, unbreakable!

He was—he *must* be!—in the very antechamber of Hell. And somewhere near, dead or alive, was Virginia Emptage. He found himself hoping she was dead! It was the best he could do for her!

THE old man-beast gave no sign of having heard Shanlon's cry of agonized protest, or of having seen his lurch toward freedom. With that same lewd chuckling welling out of his yellowed throat, he replaced the wire blanket over the pit, and clacked away from the altar.

When he was outside Shanlon's range of vision, the hoof-clatter suddenly stopped. The next thing that came to the bound man's straining ears was the moan of a woman!

Piteous and faint it was, as from someone just beginning to stir from a sleep of nightmares. Shanlon's desperate prayers for her death had not been granted! The sweat of agony dripping from his brow, Shanlon strained and tugged and twisted until he could see. And the sight he saw raised within him a surge of nausea, hate, grief, and despair that rocked his whole being.

Jenks, on a dirty, straw pallet. Jenks, her lovely body covered only by a few tattered wisps of lacy sleeping garment. Jenks, moaning and turning on the dirty pallet, eyelids fluttering, coming into consciousness—full consciousness of her plight!

And the lewd beast-man standing over her, watching, gloating, chuckling, biding his time!

Suffering stops the swift passage of time. Each second that passed was an eternity of agony to the man who lay helplessly watching his sweetheart as she slowly awoke to the horror that awaited her. In his imagination, he could already see her recoil, hear her scream in terror, feel the sickening repulsion that would fill her being.

And then, with a violent quiver, a deep-drawn sigh, a fluttering of lids, she awoke. And the agony in the young man's soul was greater than his imagination had been able to conceive. The girl did not recoil! Her scream of terror did not ring out at the sight of the lascivious face that hung

over her! But, her countenance yearning with desire, she lifted her slender, white arms and clasped them around the scrawny neck of the unclean beast!

Anger, despair, hate choking him, Bruce Shanlon shoved himself back hard against the jagged rocks of the grotto wall and tried to saw at his wrist-bonds. But he succeeded only in lacerating his arms and starting a weakening flow of blood. The smooth, taut bands did not give to the friction.

And then the Old Goat-man, leaving the girl, once more went over to make his portentous gesture above the hell-pit before the altar. Again, there was the belching of lava and stone against the netting. And again, the Thing removed the net and laid it to one side.

Shanlon's heart leaped with bitter thankfulness. How preferable was her death! It would be all over in an instant —clean, decent destruction! And then, he knew with nauseous certainty, that his hopes had been in vain. For the man-beast, curvetting and prancing back to where the girl lay, executed around the straw pallet a grotesque, hideous caricature of the primitive wooing dance. Then down on his ungainly knees he went—and took the willing girl in his arms!

Death was to come—yes. But first. . . !

SHANLON now was snarling like a wild beast. Unmindful of the cutting and flaying of his skin, he rubbed and sawed his wrists against the rocky wall.

Once more the girl, at the beast-man's bidding, lay relaxed upon the bed of dirty straw. In agony, Shanlon cried out her name. If she, or the Thing that knelt beside her heard, they gave no sign. They seemed completely insulated by a fog of desire.

The lascivious beast-man was taking his time, savoring in anticipation the pleasure that was to be his. Bending above the lovely, almost-nude body of the languishing girl, he touched her soft, brown hair lingeringly, slipped his scabrous fingers down her soft, pallid cheeks and brought them to rest, for a moment, upon the marble column of her throat, that devil's chuckle ever burbling from his hideous lips. Then, slowly, spinning out the gloating foretaste, his dirty, gnarled hands slid over every lovely curve, the beautiful concave of waist and stomach, the graceful, ivory thighs.

Suddenly his chuckle was gone, and lust, vicious from too long sharpening, rose to a snarl in his knotty throat. He snatched at the remaining wisps of her filmy nightdress, stripping them from her. His bony arms went around her, dragging her to him. His drooling, filthy mouth was upon her ripe, young lips.

Shanlon never knew whether he ever uttered a sound, or whether his agony died in his throat as in the helplessness of a nightmare. He only knew that the vicious beast-man was pressing the girl closer, bending her body backward into a taut, white bow, that frenziedly he was welding their two bodies—his own grotesque hybrid form and the girlish slenderness—into one, that. . . .

And then Shanlon whirled. What he saw made his heart hammer wildly in his breast, for hope—unexpected hope—suddenly took the place of despair. From a dark tunnel at the back of the grotto, strode the embodiment of power and fury. A man who belonged to that sane life that was yesterday. A friend! His friend! Jenks' friend!

"Kray! Homer Kray!" At last Shanlon found voice.

But if Kray heard Bruce's joyful greeting, he gave no heed. Too intent he was on stopping the shameful scene being enacted on that dirty straw pallet. Thunderous black eyebrows scowling to a devil's peak, he roared, "Berne!"

At the sound of his voice, the old Goat-man dropped the girl, scrambled to his

hoofed feet, and cowered back in terror. "No! No! Mein Master, I didn't mean notting."

"You filthy swine!" Kray grated out. "You knew the girl was mine!"

Shanlon plumbed the depths of desolation. He understood nothing of what was back of this, but one thing he knew—*there was no help!* False hope, flaring and dying, had left despair blacker than ever.

CHAPTER FIVE

Satan's Workshop

AFTER eons of incredible misery, they were gone, vanishing into the tunnel-like entrance from which Kray had merged. The big man had stalked out with the girl in his strong arms. The Goat-man trailed along after them.

And Shanlon was alone, almost doubting the happenings of the last few hours. But the grotto was real, the nauseous agony that gnawed his vitals was real, and his bonds were all too much a part of bitter, unconquerable reality.

He jerked, tugged, twisted his ankles, but that served only to cause them to swell and thus tighten those cursed, silken bands. He scraped and scraped upon the rocks with his wrists, but soon knew that, if he continued, insensibility from loss of blood would come before freedom. And someway, somehow, he *must* follow Jenks to her doom.

Painfully and slowly, he began to scoot across the rocky floor. And finally he was at the heavy screen that the beast-man had removed from the mouth of the pit. Turning over on his face, he slipped one foot under and one over it, and began to saw.

The smooth bands of silk seem to offer no friction. They slipped back and forth across the heavy wire with seemingly no results. But he had to keep on. And at last he could feel that there was a frayed spot. Finally, the outside band gave way and all began to loosen. Then his feet were free.

To stand the screen up between his legs and hold it firm while behind him he sawed at the bands around his sore and bleeding wrists was even a harder job. But at last, that too was done. And he was free! Free to see, and perhaps share, whatever horrible fate had befallen Jenks. To help? To save her? Surely, surely the odds were too strong, but, "Oh God, give me a chance," he prayed.

He sprang for the tunnel-exit. His flashlight pointing the way, he ran along the dark, narrow passage. And soon, cold fear ran with him, for he could find no signs of another underground room, of people, of Jenks! He could hear nothing. He seemed to be running in a maze—perhaps a circle—getting nowhere.

He pressed on frantically, ever searching for some sign of the way taken by Kray and the girl he held captive. And then, battery burned out, his light was gone! Still he stumbled on, bumping into rough walls, stumbling over stones. Trembling with sheer exhaustion, a sob rose to his throat. And then he saw it—a foot or two above his head, a chink, with light coming through!

Realizing it was too high to see through, he feverishly dug with his jack-knife a toe-hold in the slimy wall. Crouching, he sprang upward, his foot seeking the notch he had cut, his hand grabbing for the hole where the streak of light came through.

Before he knew what had happened, he was in a heap on the ground, chunks of mud showering over him. He had slipped. His lunge for a view had failed! But there was more light! His grab had pulled out some of the mud wall. Not considering what he might be getting into, he sprang again and again, until he knew the hole was big enough to admit his body.

Tucking his flash-light up his sleeve as a weapon, he stepped up once more into

his toe-hold, and stuck his head through. Everything was as still as the grave. There was no one in sight. But what he saw made his brain whirl in astonishment.

He scrambled on through, more of the thin mud wall falling away as he did, and dropped to the floor on the other side. Amazed, he stared around him. He was in an elaborate, fully equipped laboratory. And, slowly, it began to have meaning.

Series of huge glass U-tubes, great piles of charcoal, and heaps of glass wool. Those ungainly Woulff's bottles. That katharometer. Piles of cubical, black cystals—thorianite. A capped pipe coming into the side of the wall over a zinc work-table.

He stepped over to that pipe and turned a small pet-cock. A small hissing sound, but no color, no odor. Helium! He should have known. For years, ever since they had discovered traces in the springs of Mazieres, Santenay, and Neris in France, and Bath, England, scientists had expected mineral springs to reveal a new source.

What a dupe he'd been! Those great bottles of concentrated nitric acid, most corrosive of all acids, held the answer to the consumed skulls of today's victims. The blue halo had been nothing but a harmless, easily-produced type of phosphorescent "stage-fire." Once applied to the victim's head—by means of rubbing it on the hat-band—only darkness was necessary to bring it into blazing blue incandescence. The flaming wall that had encircled the valley was the same thing on a much larger scale. And those huge, carefully-folded stacks of three-ply silk—they were storage balloons for the helium. The wavering giants which he had seen on the hill were the same thing, painted with grotesque faces—to frighten away the superstitious and ignorant! He groaned at his own folly, engendered by fear for the one he loved.

Grimly, he picked up an iron pipe from the floor, and made for the heavy wooden door at the end of the room. Cautiously, he crept up the few steps that the open door revealed, pushed up a trap-door, and stepped out.

He was in a familiar, candle-lit room! The lean-to kitchen of Aunt Susan Gorth's shack!

OUT the open door, Bruce could see Miracle Inn blazing with lights in the valley below. But there was no use turning that way for help, for down there lay nothing but desolation and death. His heart leaped when he saw Aunt Susan's old shotgun in the corner.

Breaking it and finding it loaded, he took it and the lighted candle, and descended the steps beneath the trapdoor. He peered all around, and finally found what he sought—an almost indiscernible rectangular cut in the wall. Setting the candle on the floor, he pushed on the left side, but there was no give. And on the right—with the same result. Stooping and bracing himself, he shoved with all his might at the bottom of the door, and—it pivoted upward on a rod, revealing a short passage ending in a glow of light.

Cautiously, he slipped down that passage-way. He could hear voices, among them, Kray's! So Jenks was there! And this time, with common sense once more ruling, and with the advantage of having a gun, he would. . . .

From some hell-dark niche in the side of the tunnel wall, two or three assailants fell upon him at once. All he knew was that he was fighting and gouging in a mesh of arms and legs, and that, at last, he was down, bound—again helpless!

One of the brutes dragged him on into the lighted room, shoved him back against the wall with a rough kick, and taunted, "Don't you think we got no ears, smart guy?"

Yes, Jenks was there lying inertly on a stone lab table. And also Kray, two other fellows of foreign appearance, the old creature whom Kray had called Berne. Aunt

Susan Gorth, and one more person. Shanlon had thought he was beyond all surprise, but—Dr. Sam! Old Dr. Sam, who had known Jenks since childhood, consorting with these murderers!

"But, Kray," Dr. Sam was pleading, "you promised me there would be no bloodshed. And there wouldn't have been—except for that waitress—if you hadn't encouraged them to stay. All we wanted was to make the girl give up and move out. And that would have been simple. Resort places are so easily killed."

"You forget, my dear doctor, the snooping water-dispenser boy. He found out too much," said the full-lipped blond man in hissing foreign accent.

"Heh! heh!" cackled Old Susan, "I'm gonta git a halfa milyun dollars."

"No more'n me," snapped the old man querulously. It was plain now, since he had stopped his acting, that he was no legendary creature, but, like Aunt Susan, a tool of these fiends—an old country man whose withered, crooked legs had been encased in cleverly-made goatskin tights and whose feet had been shod with hoof-like shoes.

The others paid no attention to their ignorant accomplices.

The other foreigner's black-browed china eyes blazed comtempt. "Herr Kray must always have a new amourette."

Kray drew himself to his full height and the devil glinted through his black eyes. "You forget yourselves. *I* am master here! Go, you sniveling cowards, deflate your balloons, hide everything, put a dozen bottles of moonshine under the old woman's house as an excuse for the trap-door, if the stupid police should find it. Then when this blows over you can—"

"All we want, Herr Kray," said the full-lipped man softly, "is to secure this helium for our country. Some we will transport at nights, and some we will leave in this country, in case—just in case it should become necessary to drop upon the Americans a few quiet bombs from dirigibles. Uncle Sam has been selfish with his helium. We'll get it anyway. Come, let's get to work."

When they were all gone but Kray and Dr. Sam, the old man approached the younger as he stood looking intently upon the trance-ridden face of the nude girl. "Kray," he begged, "you can't harm this girl—just to satisfy your own lust."

Imperiously, Kray answered. "You don't know what you are talking about. This girl's body is perfection, and for me she is a superb experiment. I'm a better brain specialist than you hick doctors ever saw. I'm not Homer Kray. I am Hortu Kranovsky! And our recent use of the acid has suggested something to me. With burning out a little of the brain here, a little there"—his slender surgeon's hands touched the girl's head delicately—"I can make her what I want. I will remove inhibitions, senseless moral stoppages. To this perfect woman's body, I will give the fierce, unbridled passion of an animal!"

Shanlon's beast-like roar of anger seconded the wild protest of Dr. Sam who pulled at the surgeon's arm. "You can't—you mustn't—you—"

With a violent blow, Kray knocked the old man away. He seemed hardly to notice as Dr. Sam's head crashed into a stone and the old man slumped into a senseless heap.

For the brain surgeon was already working delicately with a pair of shears—clipping away a patch of the girl's soft hair, just over her right ear!

NO MAN can endure the endless terror and despair that Shanlon had endured and stay entirely normal. Bruce could not stop the sobs that racked his body. He could not still the nervous rigors that shook him. If he could have *done* anything! If he could have died fighting for her!

But all he could do was to watch the

slow, painstaking process of making the girl he loved into a beautiful, insensible beast. He watched the glint of the fine surgeon's tools as Kranovsky removed them from a kit and dropped them into a sterilizer.

Though the girl's eyes were open, her body was entirely lax, yielding. Yet, Kray soon held a cone over her nose and Shanlon could smell the sickening odor of chloroform. Then the surgeon strapped her shoulders and limbs to the table.

Shanlon learned how long ten minutes can be as Kray took up the green soap and washed his hands. Then his rubber gloves were on.

A whisper—a sane whisper in a mad world—was in his ear. "Keep sobbing! Don't stop! Keep on!" Dr. Sam, head bleeding, eyes bloodshot, stood over him!

Shanlon felt a dull knife sawing at the bonds at his wrists. But Kray had the little glass pot of acid and a swab! Shanlon's wrists were loose, and the old country doctor was hacking away at the heavy silk bands at Bruce's ankles. But Kray held the scalpel and he was cutting, and there was blood! Blood spurting from an incision in the girl's head!

Then Shanlon was free, and he and Dr. Sam were charging the preoccupied, unsuspecting Kray! And the mad surgeon was knocked out!

But the others, hearing the noise, were coming! Dr. Sam with Susan Gorth's shotgun blasted the first two fellows and turned the attention of the others, while Shanlon just inside the door, laid them out with a length of iron pipe.

And then, it was all over.

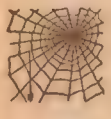
WHEN Virginia Emptage, with expert attention in a Dallas hospital, began to convalesce, her chief worry was about the punishment that might be meted out to old Dr. Sam Nortan; and her only grief was for those who died in the ruthless efforts of the vicious men who had plotted to secure a supply of helium for a destructive and heartless dictator.

As for Dr. Sam, the law, listening to the plea of Jenks and Bruce, dealt leniently with him, and soon he would be on parole, dosing out remedies and homely advice to the guests at Miracle Inn. And Jenks found some comfort for the loss of the friends who had remained faithful to her, when she realized that their sacrifice had saved the lives of countless others from wanton destruction.

Miracle Inn lies in darkness now, but it is a darkness of peace and rest beneath a friendly sky. The aura of evil hatred and fear has been dispelled and blown away. In the day time the peaceful quiet of the valley is broken only by the sounds of the engineers sent by Uncle Sam to survey the land he has just bought; and by the happy sounds of preparation being made for the return of Mr. and Mrs. Bruce Shanlon.

THE END

HELL'S SALES MANAGER



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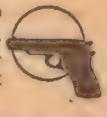


DETECTIVE TALES

On Sale Now!

CHAMBER OF HORRORS

OUR MAIL BAG lately has been filled to overflowing with letters from you readers of HORROR STORIES. Many of the suggestions and comments contained therein are excellent and pertinent, and all will receive the most careful consideration.

Mrs. Rose M. Ewens, of Hill, N. H., amidst a shower of compliments that has us blushing painfully, has a suggestion to make. Says Mrs. Ewens, ". . . there used to be a vampire story in nearly every issue, until some cranks wrote to say they didn't like vampire stories. Well, I'm sure that a good many of us do like them, and with all the other stories you publish, I think that the cranks should be able to stand at least one vampire story an issue. . . . Please let us have a good old vampire story once in a while . . . !"

All right, Mrs. Ewens. There are, indeed, several others who think as you do; and it may interest you to know that we have in preparation two or three vampire stories which we think are as good as anything we have published in the past. The reason we've not printed so many of them lately is that we'd kind of gotten the idea that maybe you readers were getting tired of them. Apparently we misjudged you. The vampire story seems to be of the kind whose interest never fades—well, keep your eyes open from now on!

Edgar Wood of Austin, Texas, thinks we've been too nationalistic. "I want stories," writes Edgar, "with backgrounds of foreign and exotic scenes and customs. Once in a while you give us readers a story about Egypt, Africa, or South America. Why not more of these—let us leave the country we know so well, and spend a little time in those places we always hoped we could visit personally. . . ."

Edgar, your plea falls on sympathetic ears; but the final decision is up to the rest of your fellow readers. After all, there are few things found in foreign lands that can't be duplicated right here in our own great country—however, if our mail bag tells us that enough of you readers want your stories laid on distant shores, you shall have them!

I AM THE TIGER GIRL!

I know that I am something less than human—for every time I run my hands lightly down Burt's bare arm, I ache with the horrible desire to dig my long, claw-like fingernails into his soft skin; to rend and tear, and bathe my hands in his spurting blood!

CHAPTER ONE

The Black Beast

THE first time it happened was when I was a girl of seventeen. It was summer—a breathless hot night. I was lying on my bed without covers, my nightdress drawn high so that the faint stirring breeze through the open bedroom

A Novelette of Blood-Chilling Horror and Unholy Desires

By GABRIEL WILSON

window might cool me. At seventeen I was a girl almost matured, with long slim legs, sleek thighs and high full breasts, more fully developed than my years would most naturally seem to warrant.

I recall that I lay only half asleep, slowly stretching my long prehensile toes with their grey, pointed toenails. I knew that I was an abnormal girl, both physically and mentally. But nothing of that was in my mind that night. Gradually I drifted into sleep, vaguely conscious of the grateful breeze on my moist legs, thighs and abdomen.

Then suddenly I was awake upon a tide

of horror. My bedroom was on the ground floor; the black shape had come in through the open window, of course. I awoke to find it bending over me—to feel the caress of a man's hand on my flesh, and then his fingers firmly over my mouth as I tried to scream.

I think now that I was never more than half-conscious, swooning from sheer terror so that I can only remember vaguely those brief moments of fantastic horror. There was only my dim vision of the man's burning eyes through his black hood—his white hands caressing me—his panting breath upon my neck. I think he did not speak. And suddenly, vaguely, I felt a long trail of pain down the side of my thigh.

With a surge of horror, I fainted. When I recovered, the black shape was gone. There was nothing to testify that it had been with me save my own confused shuddering memories, which were so vague that even in my own mind I wondered if I had been dreaming.

My memories—and the long scratch which oozed blood across my thigh. They said that I had scratched myself. My own ghastly abnormality made it horribly plausible. There was no one to believe my wild tale of a sex-mad, black-robed man caressing me—then scratching my thigh and vanishing. My very telling of such things convicted me of being a girl who was neurotic—my own abnormal thoughts personifying themselves into that vision of a man scratching me with long, talon-like claws.

Dr. Moffet, our family physician, said that to my Uncle William Talfen. I heard them discussing it. And the housekeeper's nephew—a big, gangling, loutish youth named Peter—I saw him in the doorway, as he was listening, wide-eyed, sucking in his breath as he stared. . . .

I said no more about that black-robed monster who had come into my room in the night. Sometimes I was willing, in my own heart, to believe Dr. Moffet that no such monster existed.

But I really knew that was not so. For always, after that first horrible night, I was conscious of being watched. Eyes in the darkness always seemed to be upon me—eyes of lust, drinking in the beauty of my body. Someone who was constantly around me now in my daily life who did not dare repeat his attack too soon, watching me, spying upon me, watching his chance. Someone who was attracted by my body which was *so weirdly, horribly cat-like!*

MY NAME is Landa Maine. I was born of Mid-European parents and brought to this country at the time of their execution for espionage activities, to be placed in the hands of competent Americans until I was of age and would come into my parents' huge fortune. But they were no more than lackeys really. My life was governed by two guardians whom I knew as Uncle Michael and Uncle William.

I think that all my life, I knew that I was abnormal. I loved cats—my own cat, Fluff, most particularly—with a passionate devotion. It was as though there were an affinity between us—Fluff and I, with a secret understanding which neither she nor I could voice. Physically, my abnormality showed itself most in my fingernails and toenails. They grew with amazing rapidity, and they were far thicker than normal.

I was sixteen, when in a fit of temper I scratched my Uncle William Talfen. It left me shaken and afraid of myself—afraid most particularly because it seemed to have aroused in me a strange kind of lust. And when the blood oozed from the marks my finger nails had made, and I looked down and saw the blood on the nails themselves, I stole hastily away and licked the warm blood from my fingers to get them clean.

It was that same summer when Cook had her nephew Peter come and visit with her. He slept in the servants' quarters; but he and I climbed trees—I was sure-footed and wore sneakers and found that I could climb and cling to the branches better than he—and Fluff my cat would watch us round-eyed, sleepily from her place at the foot of the tree. Peter and I would tell stories to each other on the side verandah, when day was merging into night and the wind whispered through the scented honeysuckle on the trellis.

"Why do all your stories have cats in them?" he asked, one evening.

"Cats?" I echoed. "Why—I really don't know. I guess it's because I like them—"

"But they're always doing terrible things," he remonstrated. "Sneaky and cruel. . . . You're a queer girl. All your stories are full of cats and blood and things."

God knows it was true. My thoughts were like that! But the realization only enhanced my obsession. I would work for hours over my nails, bringing them to a finer point, angry if my nail-file seemed not to do its work well and flinging it the length of the room in my exasperation.

That winter passed; and it was the next summer when the black-robed shape attacked me. . . . God knows, after that horrible night I lived always in shuddering terror, with no one to whom I dared confide but Fluff. She was a big handsome cat now. She would rub herself up against me and gaze at me with her inscrutable grey-green eyes, as though she understood my unexpressed fears.

Then I met Burt Stagg. It was a hot night of August. The door opened and the maid showed in Dr. Moffet, our family physician. There was a young man with him. I uncurled myself from the chair and came forward.

"Hello, Landa," the doctor said. "This is my young nephew, Burt Stagg. I want you to know each other—"

He was tall and laughing and handsome, with deep grey eyes and whimsical smile. But he bit his nails, and I could not feel their ends when he held my hand as we walked about the countryside. I urged him to let them grow. He said he would try—he didn't know why he had the habit of biting them. Once I ran mine down his bare arm, while we lolled by a small stream at the edge of our grounds. At the touch of my nails on his arm, he looked at me strangely.

"Why did you do that?" he asked.

"Oh—I don't know. Perhaps because I like you—" Suddenly there came into my consciousness the realization that I had loved Uncle William when I scratched him. And his blood on my fingers had given me a strange thrill!

At Burt's stare, I flushed with anger. How like a cat I was, with sudden anger making me want to scratch this man, whom already I knew I loved!

"Don't look at me that way," I said angrily. "I'm not going to hurt you!"

I had grown to be lithe and pantherlike in my movements, with a strange elasticity of muscle. And my temper had sharpened even beyond my early childhood. Swift impulses, quite beyond my control, would grip me. And always my first instinct was to scratch my antagonist.

Burt's gaze remained calmly fixed upon me now. His cool grey eyes were unwavering. The boyish grin was gone from his face. In his expression there seemed a doglike persistence, and I felt that he was penetrating my thoughts.

And then he quietly repeated: "Why did you run your nails down my arm, Landa?"

"Damn you!" I flared. "Stop looking at me! That's what the black shape does—always staring at me so that I'm afraid to take my clothes off. Fluff knows how it feels to be stalked at night by something that lusts for you—" I bit back the words. Dear God—what horrible things for me

to say to Burt! I saw him tense, with puzzled eyes. But he only said, gently:

"Landa dear—please—" He reached for one of my hands and lifted it, gazing at my pointed nails.

"Stop staring at my nails," I cried. I tried to drag my hand away, but he clung to it.

"You ought to keep them cut, Landa," he insisted. "I wish you would do that for me—"

Before I realized what was happening, my other hand whipped out and my nails dug into his arm. And as the blood poured out and covered my fingers, a strange sense of satisfaction filled my being.

"Landa—you poor darling—"

He whipped out a handkerchief and wrapped it carelessly about his ripped arm. He was giving no thought to what I had done to him. His sudden burst of tender alarm for me at what I had done, put me off guard. The blood on my fingers—I wanted so much to get my fingers to my lips and clean it off—but I could not, with Burt staring at me. . . .

Then suddenly his arms were about me, and he was drawing me to him. The fight was gone out of me. I was limp and afraid.

The shadows of night were creeping about us. There was a chill in the air. Abruptly I was cold. I shivered.

And then, with Burt's warm breath close to my neck and his softly whispered words of love and desire to protect me always, a sob shook me and I clung to him.

His lips found mine, and my soft yielding body, now sinuously resilient, clung to his strong heavy frame. I burrowed my head under his chin and rubbed it back and forth in contentment. His body was warm and its warmth seemed to warm me. He stroked my soft, fluffy hair and his firm lips held mine once more.

But the memory of my fingers as they tore at his flesh, gave my answering passion to his caresses. And as the night closed in, and he asked me to marry him, slyly I managed to edge sidewise at last, and lick the now hardened blood from my fingers. And then I answered softly that I would marry him.

Burt was to stay for dinner. We were almost to the house, when I remembered his torn arm. He had on his coat now, with the handkerchief still wadded loosely about the wounds.

"Burt," I said. "Your arm. Don't tell Uncle William—"

"You know better than to ask that," he said gently. "You and I are going to fight this out together—but let's forget it tonight, shall we?"

CHAPTER TWO

I—the Monster!

UNCLE WILLIAM was in the hallway, as we arrived. He was a very tall, military-looking man of fifty odd, with dark hair, grey at the temples. His manner was abrupt but kindly. He smiled at us now.

"I'm glad you young people got back," he said. "Landa, your Uncle Michael is here. He will remain with us indefinitely. I get a bit lonely, Burt," he added apologetically. "And Michael Morne is good company."

"I had an idea you were brothers," Burt said. "But you say he is Mr. Morne?"

"We are not related."

"But you're both Landa's uncles," Burt persisted. It seemed to me a bit rude for him to be so inquisitive.

Obviously my uncle felt the same way. "We are her uncles and guardians," he said shortly. "I think that covers everything."

I dressed in a grey-white fluffy dinner dress; and I put grey polish on my finger and toe nails. It glistened in the half-light of my window seat, where I sat for a time

after I was ready to go down for dinner. With my skirt raised to my thighs, silently I stared down at the slim length of my legs, at my long sinuous toes with their pointed, grey-white nails.

I put on grey stockings, and pointed grey slippers and went downstairs. Uncle Michael was in the dining room, with his back to us, as we entered a few moments later. He was quite unlike my other guardian, and I really did not know him well at all. His pompous, fussy manner made him seem almost unreal, like a character in a book. His eyes were small and beady. His mouth small, set absurdly in a fat, jowly face. He was short and plump and, incongruously for a fat man, he never smiled. He took his guardianship seriously. Often his prying questions, his beady eyes on my nails, his rough attitude toward my cat, antagonized me.

Tonight he did not improve my temper. Burt and I happily told him and Uncle William that we were to be married. Uncle William smiled kindly. "That's the best news I've ever heard," he said.

But Uncle Michael shot me a beady look. My hand was raised, with a fork lifted to my mouth. His sharp look followed it as it dropped back to my plate. He was staring at my grey fingernails.

I felt my temper rising. I wanted to take the fork and rip down his fat, ill-colored cheek. But I felt Burt's eyes upon me, and Uncle William's. My breast rose and fell. Almost I was panting with rage.

"Well," I said, "You don't say anything, Uncle Michael—"

I watched him furtively.

"You can't marry," he said. "I don't know why your Uncle William gives his consent this way. He knows as well as I do, it's out of the question. For the present, at least."

I HAD tasted the delight of using my nails earlier in the day. Now I reached for his hand, and under the pretext of persuasion, I gripped it and my nails sank into his pudgy flesh. He winced and stared at me.

"Please take time to think this over," I said slyly. My nails were like fangs tonight. I had worked swiftly on them before polishing them. "I shall be eighteen in three months, you know."

"Take it easy, Landa," Burt said. "We're going to be married all right. It just takes talking over."

"Dr. Moffet is dropping in tonight," Uncle Michael said. "We'll have his opinion. For my part, young man, there are matters you should consider, before you rush into a thing of this kind—" He was still looking at my nails. His bulbous pig-like eyes considered them. "That girl's nails should be kept cut," he said briefly. "I don't think that's an unreasonable order."

There was a sharp quality in his voice which surprised me, for Dr. Moffet was a slow-moving, slow speaking man of powerful build. His hair was grey and his face deeply lined. It took all my patience to wait for him to answer a question or finish a sentence. He was stooped and his head hung slightly forward. His hands were large and he moved heavily, although he was not a heavy man. I had never liked or trusted him. His prying eyes were everywhere. Tonight, suddenly I realized that it was possible he had brought Burt and introduced him to me, for the purpose of having him spy upon me. Certainly he had told Burt about my nails.

There was no one I could trust. There was no one who trusted me, in the final sense. How cat-like that feeling was! But I felt that Fluff was dependable. She sat wisely listening now, as we gathered in the sitting room, licking her paws, stretching. But always her eyes were upon me.

My two uncles, Burt and Dr. Moffet were drinking black coffee and smoking. "I'd rather Landa left while we have our

tussle," Burt said smilingly. But I could see there was a deadly earnestness behind his smile.

"I can't see why," Uncle Michael said. "There'll be things discussed—I'd rather she weren't here—" Burt insisted. "You don't mind, darling. Do you?"

I remembered his tenderness of the late afternoon and the wounds on his arm. I loved him very deeply, at that moment. But I was wary.

"It won't take long?" I asked.

"No dear. Not long." He stood up beside me and his arm drew me to him briefly. "Just trust me—please, darling?" There was an eager entreaty in his eyes.

I felt a new and strange frustration holding me from him. "It is you who must trust me," I stammered. "Oh Burt—I—I'm afraid of everyone—"

THEIR talk lasted for over two hours. I could hear Dr. Moffet's slow, pedantic voice, Burt's flares of anger—my two uncles, arguing, reasoning. . . .

And always the talk came back to Burt's risk in such a marriage. They talked as though I were a wild panther who might do him bodily harm. . . .

Fluff was with me. She was a huge animal now, wiry. She wasn't purring. She was tense, alert. I knew she was listening to the voices in the next room. Once her claws dug into me as Uncle Michael's raised voice came to us:

"She can't marry without my consent, and I refuse it. And if she had one atom of brains, she'd be afraid herself, afraid to take the chance—if she loves this young man. Why she'd scratch his eyes out in the first month."

"Dear God," I murmured to the tense cat in my arms. "Why don't I face it? Why can't I make myself realize—"

But beneath my conflict with myself, there was a raging fury at this man who stood between me and happiness. I was as tense as Fluff. My fingers, with their claw-like nails, worked convulsively. I did not trust myself! I must get up to my room, or out in the grounds and prowl around there, until this fury had time to die. But how did I dare prowl with that black monstrous shape that was always watching me! I went into the grounds only a little distance. Then, ignoring my fear, I ran into the woods. Crouched—as Fluff would have crouched, peering.

At last I went back to the large gloomy house set among the trees. It was lighted from one end of it to the other. How long I had been outside, I do not know. An hour or more. Burt and the others had long since separated.

I came into the house. Tears blinded my eyes, but my heart was still aflame with fury and outrage at these people, who stood gaping as I came into the hallway. I barely saw who was there as I leaped past them and up the stairs to my room.

Chaotic memories are all I have of what followed in those next hours. Uncle William came to my door and finally forced me to open it. His face was ashen, his eyes, as they looked at me, were deep pools of fear. He asked me why I had done it!

Done what?

Uncle Michael lay dead. He had fallen, or been pushed, from the side veranda terrace, to the bottom of the ravine, fifty feet below, and his head had hit a rock—and there was a deep nail gauge in one of his hands. I denied having killed him. And Uncle William never accused me again.

But when I asked to go away, and stay in seclusion for a while, he said that was best. I had always liked Cook. He said she would care for me. And I knew that if Burt was not the one who had killed my hated Uncle Michael, he would be sure that I had done it. No one could believe, after what had transpired that night, that it was an accident, even though it might have been.

Cook and I went furtively to the small farmhouse Uncle William had obtained for us. I had fled from Burt. Even though my hands seemed nerved to uncontrollable desire, to feel his firm flesh beneath my restless fingers, I had no right to him. I was a craven, lustful enemy to him. Unfit to make even the fight for normalcy and love.

Then one night I dreamed that he had come to me. It was a harrowing, sinister dream. He angered me. And I tore at him with my fiendish claws and ripped out both his eyes. The eyeless sockets oozed wells of blood. The eyes themselves lay on the floor. And they stared at me with an unmentionable loathing in them. I tried to get away from them, but they followed me, rolling after me like marbles. I rushed to a dark closet. But before I could close the door, they were in there with me, staring, their grey-green depths coming closer and closer to me until I screamed with fear.

I awakened, finding myself backing from my cat, who was on the bed, gazing questioningly at me. The dream left me shattered. And I swore once more, that I would never see Burt again.

CHAPTER THREE

Coming of Terror

I HAD been in this lonely hideout for almost two months, when a wire came telling Cook of the desperate illness of her mother, only ten miles from our farm here. She hesitated over leaving me, but I was calm and insistent.

"If you'll let me cut your nails," she said.

She winced at the look I gave her. And she packed and was out of the house and on her way to her mother, in less than an hour.

I had not thought I would mind being here alone with my cat. The black-robed prowling man-shape which had attacked me, seemed not to have followed me up here. Since the death of Uncle Michael, somehow I felt the lusting, watching gaze upon me in the darkness, had gone. But now, in my lonely cottage, the night when Cook departed, again real terror flooded me. Would the black shape come? It was a man, of course. Someone I knew, and never suspected, very probably. Someone who knew me—who lusted for my body, because I was weird, abnormal, cat-like!

When night came, after Cook left and I was alone, I went into the low-ceilinged farmhouse, with its eerie lamplight, holding Fluff close to me. I lighted the fire in the big open fireplace. I loved an open fire, and so did Fluff. She purred happily, following me in my movements. Then I curled down on the woven rug before it and Fluff gazed placidly at me from her seat at the other side of it.

Gradually, the flames died down. They had been the only light in the room. An eerie silence filled the place. And instead of Fluff falling into a tranquil sleep, she was alert: listening. Then I too, heard the sounds which had reached her: someone crunching along the winding path. My fingers twitched. I crept noiselessly to a darkened aperture at the other end of the room and crouched, watching.

There was a long silence. Someone prying about, perhaps even now peering in one of the windows. Fluff was stalking toward the outer hall. I followed her. Then I heard a voice:

"Landa! Are you there? It's Burt—"

A wave of strange, overpowering joy flooded me. I had not known how much I loved and wanted him—how desperately lonely I had been all these days away from him. In my excitement, I clenched my fingers. They drove into my flesh. A warning?

My joy faded as quickly as it had come. A horror, more terrible than any emotion

in my life, swept me. Did I dare see him, with all my pent-up, starved desires, so uncontrollable—so predictable. . . .

I choked back the words which had flooded to my lips. And suddenly, I heard a window open and he had jumped into the room where I stood cowering.

"Landa—my poor darling—" His rush of emotion and pity stirred me to a vague resentment.

But his next words and the tenderness on his face, swept it away. "I've been so lonely, dear. I can't live without you, Landa—"

With a rush, I was in his arms, sobbing out my fears, showing him my long claw-like nails, like a humble nun at her confessional, pleading with him to go away before I did some unforgivable thing.

HE DREW me to a couch facing the dying embers of the fire. "The first thing I'm going to do, darling, is to take away any danger from those dear fingers. Here—see, I've brought these scissors. Not for my protection, but for your own peace of mind—"

I drew away. "Not that! Oh, Burt, not that! I couldn't give up my nails—"

He was very gentle. "Why, Landa? Do they mean more to you than me?"

I felt myself going into a panic; bewildered, cornered.

"Not my nails—Burt, you don't know what you're asking—"

He smiled into my frightened eyes. His arm went about me and he drew me close to him and kissed me tenderly. "If you'll let me stay and promise once more to marry me, we'll forget them, dear. I had no idea you felt that way about them." His puzzlement was drowned in the passion rising to his eyes as he gazed at me. His caressing hands drew me backwards onto his knee.

He leaned forward. His hot lips reached mine. "I've been so lonely," he repeated. "I finally located your Uncle William in New York. I told him to give me your address, or I'd get the police after you."

"You shouldn't have done that. I came here, because I was afraid. Uncle Michael died so strangely, and I had hurt you with my nails—"

"It was that hellish devil—your Uncle William—who killed him, I'm sure. He was on the terrace a few moments before it happened. It went down as an accident. But I told him tonight, if he didn't give me your address, I'd see that the authorities knew everything I know."

My head was in a whirl. It was hard to comprehend all that Burt implied.

"We're alone," I said softly. "My maid is away—"

I saw the love and desire rise in his gaze as it roved me. "We're to be married so soon, Landa. Tonight, you'll let me stay—you'll trust me—"

His breath was close to my face. His soft eyes were full of entreaty. He held me closer, as though never again would he give me up.

Suddenly, for the first time in my life, an overwhelming, abandoned love for another human being swept me. "Oh, Burt," I whispered. "I do love you. Yes. Cut my nails. I'd rather die than harm you—"

His smile was whimsical as he brought out the ugly scissors. I cringed inwardly, but I extended my hand. The pinion-like claws looked gruesome here in the half-shadow. I saw them for what they were: lethal weapons. A beast's defense. I had been like an animal. Alert, suspicious, trusting no one. Cat-like. Ready to spring on anyone. Glorying in it. Why did it look so revolting to me now?

Burt cut the first nail. I smothered a cry. He lifted my hand to his lips and kissed it. "It will soon be over," he said gently.

But my nerves were tensed to a breaking point. My other hand worked convulsively. Was another mad seizure to come upon me, and would I attack this man

whom I loved—tear at his eyeballs—like my dream?

I WATCHED with fascination as he finished the nails of my left hand. But the memory of my dream stood like an ominous shadow, with blood dripping down upon my white dress, and sockets without their eyeballs, and Burt, staring at me with hatred and loathing, from eyeballs which rolled like marbles—

"Don't tremble," he was saying. "Don't be afraid, dear."

"But I am afraid," I said. "Awfully afraid. Hurry, Burt—this hand. Hold it firmly. Don't let go of it—"

He took it with a grip of steel. But his eyes were smiling and tender. I glanced down at the ugly stubs of my other fingers. He had cut them almost to the quick. But I was not sorry.

"Ready to go on with it?" he asked.

"Yes."

I visualized the joy of being in his arms in another few moments, with no fear of this craven desire to desecrate our love. My heart was pounding. All the emotion of a lifetime, pent up, rose to meet this great moment.

He had cut all but two of my nails. I glanced down at them. Would this be the death of my fanaticism?

I had forgotten Fluff. But now I saw her listening to us, and yawning contentedly from her place at the fireplace. She extended her claws playfully as I watched her and stretched herself luxuriously. Then she began sharpening her claws in the rug.

Suddenly she stopped; tensed. Her hair rose up on her back. She was bristling.

"What's the matter, Fluff?" I said. "Look, Burt, she hears something—"

She meowed fretfully. Then she moved stealthily to the window, still tense, and looked out into the black night beyond. I saw her back arch and her fur bristle.

"There's someone outside," I said.

"Shall I go out and take a look?" Burt asked.

"Be careful," I murmured. "Take the flash—you'll find it there on the table. I don't know who it could be at this hour—"

I felt crippled with all but two of my nails gone; futile, helpless, afraid. Trembling, I rubbed the fleshy ends of my fingers against my palm. My weapons, gone. . . .

We went to the door together. Fluff was still at the window, bristling, turning her head as though following some moving object outside.

"Wait here," Burt said at the door.

I stood there, peering into the light made by his flash as he swung its beam before him. Then I saw a black blob rise up from the shadow of a shrub and straighten. It was a man, tall, wide-shouldered. He was close behind Burt; I saw his arm go up, silhouetted against the sky, his hand gripping a chunk of rock. I tried to cry in warning, but too late—the rock descended. Burt went down.

And then the figure whirled; came for the house. Dear God—if only my nails had not been cut! I crouched with fingers flexing, and terror so engulfing me that the dim scene swam before my gaze. Then my senses were swooping. A torrent of water seemed roaring inside my head. I must have been visible standing there in the doorway. The oncoming man saw me. I heard his panting cry of triumph. And then the roaring in my head engulfed all the world as the scene faded and I sank fainting to the ground.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Cat-Woman

I THINK I did not quite lose consciousness. Dimly I was aware of a man's hands upon me, dragging me into the liv-

ing room of the old farmhouse. Then I felt him plucking at my garments, stripping me, his hot panting breath upon my face, neck and breasts.

Mercifully then it seemed that my little consciousness faded. When it came back, the roaring in my head was mingled with a man's voice:

"So you insisted on coming here, Burt? Well, so much the worse for you."

My Uncle William Talfen! But I know now he was no blood of mine. My legal guardian, nothing more. And the blood that is in me—God knows what it is.

"Take it easy, Burt—you can't get away."

I opened my eyes dizzily to the eerie lamplight of the living room. Nude, bathed in sweat, I lay on the floor. Near me I saw Burt. He had been stripped to the waist. His arms were bound behind him; his ankles were lashed with rope. Blood gleamed wetly in his hair. But he was fully conscious, alert. The man I knew as William Talfen was at his feet, finishing tying the ropes. I must have made some little noise; he turned and stared at me—his heavy handsome face contorted with lust and triumph.

"Oh, you've come to yourself, Landa? That's what I hoped, my dear. You've work to do now. God, how I've had to deny myself all summer! Just watching you—gazing at your beauty, and I could only touch you just that one night! The night I scratched you, remember? That scratch was important. It showed what you were capable of—supposedly scratching yourself like that. It would have stood me in good stead if there had been any trouble over Michael's death—you would have been openly blamed of course, sent to jail."

He came with a leap and crouched beside me, his hands caressing me. Then he struck lightly at me with his clawed fingers.

"You like that, Landa? You should. Cats strike at each other like that, with veiled claws."

My fingers twitched; I was conscious of their soft, fleshy ends—horrible, unnatural with the nails clipped so short. Then I was kicking, trying futilely to bite him as I felt him lift me up in his arms.

"You little wildcat," he chuckled. His strength held me. And then I realized that he had set me down on my knees beside the bound Burt.

"There, that's fine, Landa." Talfen's gloating chuckle came with his labored breath. Demented madman, thrilling with some perverted pleasure as he crouched beside me. He was a madman, doubtless; but he was mad only with his lust and triumph.

"I see someone has trimmed your fingernails—all but two," he panted. "They will be enough. You can rip out his jugular vein with those two fingernails. I'll show you how to do it presently."

Only vaguely I heard his words. My head was still roaring. I had been fighting, clawing at Talfen. But now my senses were clarifying. These ropes, wound around Burt's ankles—my fingers were near them—if I could untie them—

"YOUR nails, Landa, dear," Talfen was saying ironically. "Dig them into his chest, Landa. Rip his flesh! By God, you ought to know how to do it—you damned little cat, all your life you've been practicing ripping people with your nails."

He pushed me against Burt. He seized my wrists in his hands, with powerful fingers held them, guiding my fingers with their long pointed grey nails to press into the flesh of Burt's side.

"There—like that, Landa. Scratch him—draw the blood—"

Perverted madman, thrilling to this horrible thing? Oh, he was so much more than that!

"No—no," I gasped. I tried to lunge away, but he held me. . . . Dear God, if only I could be free to untie these ropes—

"Scratch him, Landa. Dig your nails into him.

"No—"

Then suddenly the panting Talfen roared with anger. My refusal—and then I realized that he had seen one of my hands he had momentarily loosened fumbling at Burt's ropes!

"Why, damn you!" he roared. "You think you can trick me?" His fist clouted my face—a dozen swift angry blows under which I cowered, with my senses reeling.

"Stop it! Stop it, you damned coward—" Burt's voice, thick with horrified rage, rasped it out. His bound body writhed and lunged. Then Talfen's anger suddenly died. He laughed ironically and with an arm under my chin from behind, jerked my body back against him.

"Scratch him with your nails, Landa. You want me to beat you again?"

"Do it, Landa darling," Burt suddenly urged. "Do—what he tells you."

"That's better," Talfen chuckled. "Now, Landa—"

Dear God, I hardly knew what I was doing.

I felt my nails now as they ripped into Burt's flesh—felt his warm blood spurting out on my fingers. Oh dear God—what ghastly thrill was this! But it was the thrill of only a second, for horror came with it.

Then there was Talfen's murmur: "Why, that's very good, Landa. Little wildcat—you do know how to do it, don't you?"

"No—no, dear God—"

"No?" His fingers dug into my body so that a cry of pain burst from me.

"Oh, damn you—" Burt groaned. "If I could get loose—"

"But you can't!" Talfen chuckled. "Do you think I'm doing this altogether for my own pleasure? You're wrong. Landa's going to die. Michael Morne and I planned it. Her fortune of seven millions—why should I divide that with him? So—he fell off that rock. It seemed pretty certain at the time that Landa had done it. And now they'll find your body here, Burt. Your head wounded—your body bound with ropes."

He laughed sardonically. "This woman you were foolish enough to love, Burt, she is—something quite a little less than human. I'll testify to it. So will Dr. Moffet—and a dozen others who have known her. A clawing female wildcat who looks like a woman—clawing her lover to death. And then frenzied by his blood, clawing at her own throat—tearing her jugular vein and bleeding to death—"

He had lifted me now and flung me back from Burt. "I'll show you how I'm going to do this," he rasped. "You'll see your lover bleed to death, Landa!"

FOR that horrible moment I could only lie shuddering, with my fingers seeming on fire from the horror of Burt's blood. Dimly I saw the panting monstrous Talfen as he stood to one side, fumbling in his pocket, and then I saw that he was fastening something to his fingers.

"See what I have planned, Landa?" He swung back to me and as his gloating gaze fell upon my body with its sweat glistening in the lamplight, he suddenly flung himself down beside me.

"We'll test them upon you first," he muttered. "A little practice; why not?"

Dear God—my senses reeled as I saw his hands, with fingers outstretched before me—his fingers each with a grey-white, curved and pointed nail.

"Cat's claws, Landa. I killed a very large and very handsome wildcat to get them. They'll rip your throat when I'm through with you. But first, just a sample—like this." His hand with its ghastly claws lightly scratched my flesh.

Ghastly cat-nails digging across my

body. Drawing a little blood now. It made my senses reel. Dimly I was aware of Burt's oaths—the futile lunging of his lashed body. And across the room, a queer growling, hissing—

"Shall I try it harder, Landa? A little more blood, this time?"

He did not hear that sound across the room. My gaze turned. . . . A grey-white thing down on the floor across the room—a thing that was growling with a pent-up fury that ended in a spitting hiss!

And then she sprang. . . .

Talfen lunged backward from me, sprawling with his hands wildly flailing at the huge cat which was upon his face and throat. "Good God—Landa—help me!"

His scream, terrified now, mingled with Fluff's eerie spitting cry. Her claws were ripping and tearing with lightning strokes, her bloated body writhing and twisting in his hands as wildly he tried to cast her off. A second or two. God, a cat can strike a hundred blows in a second or two! Cat-claws ripping and tearing—cat-fangs biting, with spitting mouth lunging and biting again . . . . Talfen was on his back now, with torn face upturned. His hands even with their cat-nails were so futile in that swift combat.

I saw the blood spurt. Crimson fountain from his torn jugular. Fountain of ghastly crimson, pumping in spurts, rhythmic with his wildly racing heart. From the torrent of blood, the snarling Fluff sprang away—a wet grey streak crossing the floor, out through the window, vanishing into the night. . . .

I sprang to Burt; fumbled, cast off his ropes. He held my shuddering body in his arms. Across the room in the eerie lamplight, Talfen lay sprawled on his back. It was a sight of unutterable horror, that torn mangled face, ripped eye-sockets; that ghastly throat.

Burt held my face away. But I could hear the twitching body. . . .

BURT and I are married now. He never asks me why I keep my nails so closely trimmed; we never mention them at all, never talk about my horrible mysterious past. And out of it all, there is one thing that rings so often in my shuddering memory. Talfen's ironic words: "This woman you are foolish enough to love—she is something less than human."

What, in God's name, am I? And often too, I think about Fluff. She has never been seen since that ghastly night. And the weird realization strikes me: cats do not spring to fight in defense of any human they love. Yet Fluff, a perfectly normal cat, did just that. Was it because, after years of companionship with me, Fluff felt in me something less than human?

The thought makes me shudder. Often I lie beside Burt at night, thinking. And sometimes my fingers—futile with their ends only padded by flesh—reach to touch him. My long sinuous toes—so futilely soft—sometimes move to caress his leg.

My nails seem to grow very swiftly. I thrust away the damnable thoughts, but they keep coming back. And then my mind leaps ahead. Some night, dear God I know I will wind myself around Burt, clawing at him, at his eyes, at his throat!

THE END

MISTRESS OF THE WORM-MEN
By Wyatt Blassingame

Horrible murder ravaged unchecked through the streets of the old French Quarter—and there was no one to stop it or tell where next it might strike!

10¢ DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE

CARAVAN of INCREDIBLE CRIMES

No. 10—The Body Merchants

by CHARLES BOSWELL

Murder was easier than grave-robbing, these men discovered. . . .

NOT MUCH more than a hundred years ago, people in England and Scotland were faced with a horrifying situation. They were afraid to die—and for a reason beside death itself. Their peace made with their fellows and their God, nevertheless, they could not contemplate with comfort—with what meagre degree of comfort there is in dying—eternal rest. There was no quiet for the living and no quiet for the dead.

This condition was particularly true in and about the two great educational centers of the British Empire—Edin-

burgh and London. Towards the turn of the 19th century medical learning had taken great strides, a new field for research having been finally accepted. This was the human body—the human body dead.

But with the public sanction of anatomical dissection, there arose with it a greater evil than had been the taboos against it. A demand was created but no supply arranged. In the year 1825 there were in London alone twelve schools of anatomy including those at the hospitals of St Bartholomew, St. Thomas, and St. Guy. Attending these were more than seven hundred medical students avid for knowledge of how and of what the human body was made.

The Resurrectionists satisfied this need.

They were bands of ghouls, these creatures who called themselves men, characterized by their midnight prowls, their intimacy with tombstones and what lay beneath. They wore dirt-slaked clothes reeking with the stench of their undertaking and carried with them the instruments of their business—picks, spades, wheelbarrows trundling a telltale box. When apprehended they were arrested and punished. As a consequence they inhabited the shadows beyond the reach of apprehension, the cellars and back rooms of Edinburgh's tenements, the sewers and blind alleys of London's East End.

THEY were worse than common grave robbers because they stole more than grave robbers ordinarily steal. Not content with merely filching the rings, necklaces, bracelets—even the clothing in which a body was buried—they took more. Unappeased by the loot of gold from the teeth of a dead person, they went another, more ghastly step further. They violated the last sanctity of the grave. They disturbed forever the tranquil sleep of the dead. They robbed the tomb of the corpse itself.

Then they peddled their plunder at the back doors of medical schools. They bargained with porters and attendants, with internes and even doctors. They exhibited their wares and got a price, dependent on the freshness, age, and condition of the merchandise, of from 5 to 10 guineas, a matter of from $25 to $50.

No questions were asked them. No questions were necessary. The answers were well known to the body purchasers. But the doctors evaded the horrible issue of their transaction and condoned their participation in it, in the hitherto unblemished name of medicine. The doctors said to themselves: "Where else can we get bodies with which to instruct our students? For the advancement of science we've got to have them! And what difference does it make to a corpse anyway? They're dead already. They're no more dead because we dissect them! Buying from body snatchers for the present, until the State makes some provision for us, is the only solution!"

The doctors condoned their action as any profession is wont to condone any entity which appears, even momentarily, to further its progress. The doctors were not very far-sighted. If they had been they might not have so readily excused themselves. They did not see that their promiscuous practise of buying from any Resurrectionist who came along, with no investigation, with no interrogation, would eventually give rise to the perpetration of crimes more horrible, more sordid, more incredibly criminal than merely stealing bodies from graves. They failed dismally to realize that there was another, simpler, less exhausting means of obtaining a corpse.

IN THIS secondary manner, dual criminal partnerships began operations at nearly the same time. At Edinburgh, in

1827, the firm of Burke & Hare hung out its shingle, and in London the year 1831 witnessed the incorporation of John Bishop and Thomas Head. One concern was not a branch of the other, nor was there, in any sense, an affiliation or inter-negotiable relationship. Yet the practises of the two bands were almost identical. They drew their materials from the same channels, employed the same methods of manufacture, and traded with the same type establishments. It was a national and medical condition which molded both their policies, two confuting measures which shaped them into the twin Houses of Crime that they were.

Stringent legislation had been enacted against body snatching. Yet at the same time the dissecting theatres begged for cadavers. And all the while the enfranchised citizenry turned a deaf ear. It remained for John Bishop and Thomas Head, and William Burke and William Hare to pay rapt attention.

Burke and Hare got into the business by what might be termed an accident. Hare operated a dive in Tanner's Close, Edinburgh, which went by the name of Log's Boarding House. He had come by the hostelry through the facile process of tying up with Maggie Laird, slattern to the late owner.

Among the tenants of the flop joint were Donald, an ill and pensioned Highlander, and Burke, makeshift cobbler and hawker of used footgear, together with Burke's woman, Helen McDougal, a former prostitute.

Donald passed away, behind in his board bill. A few days later his quarterly remittance arrived from the government but it wasn't enough to cover both his debt and the cost of having him buried. The church donated a coffin and Burke and Hare nailed on the lid, but the Highlander's corpse wasn't inside. Burke and Hare put Donald into a tea chest and in early December, 1827, sold him to A Dr. Knox of Ten Surgeon's Square for a trifle over seven pounds. The coffin went to Donald's funeral and was interred, weighted by tanbark, with due solemnity.

After this trafficking there was a bond between Burke and Hare surpassing that which had previously existed on grounds of mere common nationality and communal existence in what amounted to a foreign land. The novitiates at body selling weren't Scots; they were Irishmen, and they'd known each other for a good long while. First meeting as fellow laborers on the Union Canal at Glasgow in 1819, it was only natural that Burke and his slattern should have, in 1826, moved from their quarters in the Beggar's Hotel, Edinburgh, when they discovered that their old crony, Hare, was operating a similar fire and morality trap almost around the corner.

This bond grew, strengthened by the incident of the passing of old Donald, ripening into a partnership with their equal participation in a matter which occurred only a few weeks after the Donald transaction.

A further "guest" stumbled into Log's, Joe the Mumper. Sick like Donald, he caused similar board bill trouble, but lacking the Highlander's agreeableness, did not conveniently die. All in all, it made a messy situation. Burke and Hare grew irritated. Log's wasn't the happiest of residences, more depressing with an ill tramp in the best bed. The Mumper got worse and worse but hung on to life in the most annoying fashion. Maggie Laird and Helen McDougal grumbled. They had to tend the patient with not a farthing pay for their labors.

The expected came about. Hare grabbed Joe's feet. Burke pushed a pillow into his face and held it. Maggie and Helen kept an eye out, acting as watchers. It was late at night. No one else was in the house. No one on the deserted streets heard Joe the Mumper die.

The day following, because he was not so old as Donald, because his corpse was of less decrepit stuff, Burke and Hare got a three pound raise on their return visit to Dr. Knox.

AS CAN be seen there was nothing novel about Burke and Hare's scheme of how to make a corpse—simply take a live man and kill him. Undoubtedly the method was known to all the Resurrectionists. Undoubtedly some others put it into practice. But none to the extent of Burke and Hare—unless it were Bishop and Head.

It was no accident that put John Bishop in the business. Already he was an infamous London ghoul. Afterwards he admitted to having disinterred more than 500 bodies from nearby cemeteries and distributing them to hospitals and medical schools.

His partner, Thomas Head, who sometimes called himself Williams because of a three year unserved prison sentence, was also his son-in-law and brother-in-law through a very strange relationship. Bishop's wife was his stepmother. Bishop was the offspring of his father's first marriage. Bishop's wife was his father's third wife, later his father's widow. Rhoda Bishop was Head's wife. Rhoda, a gutter lass of 17, was fathered by Bishop's father and mothered by Bishop's wife, being, actually, Bishop's stepdaughter as well as his half-sister.

This queer foursome dwelt in a hovel in Nova Scotia Gardens, London, which closely abutted another tenement. This last, convenient for their business, was empty.

At midnight on a Friday in October, 1831, the two ghouls, Head and Bishop, were swilling ale in a pub on Hight street, Shoreditch, near Hackney Road. On the opposite side of the thoroughfare they saw a pitted-faced, shrinking female huddled in the darkened doorway of a church, clutching a small child. Quitting the saloon, they crossed to her, asking if they could be of any help. She sobbed out that she was penniless and without shelter. She was Frances Pigburn, she said, recently of Bethnal Green. Her husband, a cabinet-maker, died leaving her destitute.

Pretending to be sorry for her, Bishop and Head asked her to Nova Scotia Gardens and she made the fatal mistake of going with them. There, before the kitchen fire, her child in her arms, they got her drunk on beer spiked with rum. She fell asleep as they had planned, but, even so, they did not know what to do with her because of the child. If they killed them both, how would they dispose of the child's body? Certainly no anatomist would buy a child.

The next morning they let her go, telling her to leave the child with a friend and to meet them at the London Apprentice in Old Street the next night at 10 o'clock. They'd find her employment and a place to live, they said. She kept the appointment. So did Bishop and Head. Leading her to the empty hulk adjoining their Nova Scotia Gardens establishment, they suggested that she take up residence there. She was tickled with the thought of having a place to live. So tickled, indeed, that she tossed down the hearth-warmer they offered her of 2 parts rum, 1 part laudanum, without tasting it.

A short time later, she dropped insensible. Head tied her feet. Bishop carted her into the yard. Both lowered her down an unused well and there they left her weighted under water. Then the ghouls went and had a drink, giving "time for the dope to run out", as Bishop later put it.

Returning, they pulled Frances Pigburn out, stripped her, and tied up her body in a hamper. They called a porter named Shields, a sinister individual frequently given odd jobs to do by Resurrec-

tionists, ordering him to carry the body by himself. But it was now just before dawn. The porter refused, claiming he'd be picked up struggling along alone. To make his appearance on the streets at so early an hour look plausibly legitimate, they got Head's wife out of bed and made her go with him, lugging a hat box as though she had just arrived off a stage. Shields consented.

Bishop and Head led the procession, trying first to dispose of their wares at St. Thomas' Hospital. There they were told by a Mr. South that it wouldn't be known if a body was needed until later. Going next to Grainger's Anatomical School in Webb Street, they sold a Mr. Appleton their merchandise for eight pounds. Shields got ten shillings. Afterwards they all went to the Flower Pot, a nearby pub. Head threw down a stiff slug of Irish whiskey to the success of their enterprise. "Cleaner work than dirty grave robbing!" he cried.

ON Sunday, the day following their disposal of the body of Frances Pigburn to Grainger's School, Bishop and Head attempted another murder. Their near-victim was a man. They gave him an insufficient dose of laudanum. Bishop said he felt constrained because of the fellow's close resemblance to his father. Two days later they tried another but again the opiate lacked the necessary strength. . . .

On the other hand, Burke and Hare met with more success. In February, 1828, they hunted up other easy meat, locating it when they came across Abigail Simpson, a wench engaged in hawking salt. Enticing her to Log's, they stupefied her with liquor and then killed her. Hare now manipulated the pillow, Burke holding the victim's legs. The tea chest was once more brought into play, Surgeon's Square paid another visit, and the ghouls were ten pounds richer.

Came March and they murdered a streetwalker who called herself Mary Haldane. She'd solicited Hare and he escorted her to Tanner's Close. In April, Burke, demonstrating his prowess in the same field, triumphed in snagging two prostitutes in a single scoop. These luckless ones were Mary Paterson (whose unclad person was declared worshipped by all frequenters of Edinburgh houses of ill repute), and her sister in sin, Janey Brown.

Burke and Hare got Mary pie-eyed but their booze-buying resources ran out with Janey Brown yet conscious and holding the floor. They couldn't smother Mary with Janey looking on. They were afraid to have a try at Janey while she still had her strength and possession of her faculties. And, furthermore, they couldn't easily give Janey the bounce.

But here Helen McDougal saved the day. She charged the party, demanding to know what her spouse was doing with such a pair of chippies. Janey ran. Mary was shown the pillow trick and promptly despatched the way of similar flesh. Helen McDougal giggled uproariously and with grim humor.

Next, Burke and Hare slew a pair of unidentified women tramps and, afterwards, a half-sick Englishman. Then they put out of misery Mary Haldane's half-witted daughter, a girl no more virtuous than was Mary. This lass, believing her mother had become the mistress of two rich men, came to apply for a similar job. And as soon as Burke and Hare had gotten rid of her corpse they had a couple of others on hand—an impoverished Irishwoman and her deaf and dumb grandson. After a big supper one night Burke choked the hag to death. Before breakfast the following morning he broke the boy's back with a heavy chair.

Again the tea chest was produced but it proved too small for the stock on hand.

They supplemented it with a herring barrel and hired a horse and rig to get them to Knox's. In Grassmarket the horse balked and couldn't be made to go further. Burke and Hare, with the aid of a porter, dragged the chest and barrel the rest of the way. Collecting sixteen pounds, they returned to the horse. Burke, enraged at the beast's obstinacy, cut its throat while it still stood in harness.

A few weeks later, business being dull, Maggie Laird proposed a stirring suggestion. That they kill Helen McDougal and sell her. Why not? Maggie paid Helen the dubious compliment of wagering she would bring a fancy price. Besides, said Maggie, with Helen out of the way living expenses could be cut.

Hearing of this, Helen fled to Falkirk to the home of a cousin, Anne McDougal. Burke followed. He persuaded her to return to Edinburgh and take separate lodgings. This they did, at another cousin of Helen's, John Groggan's in Gibb's Place. Anne McDougal was invited up from Falkirk. Burke called in Hare.

They killed Anne McDougal and sold her to Dr. Knox.

Afterwards they murdered Daft Jamie, half-wit of Edinburgh, pet of all who roamed the streets of the city. Here was their initial error, the next to their last. The medical student to whom Daft Jamie was allotted for dissection saw who he was. He notified the authorities and inquiry was made as to the cause of Jamie's demise. But it was far from penetrating. It set people talking, that was all.

ON FRIDAY, October 21, 1831, hardly a week after the killing of Frances Pigburn, Bishop and Head discovered another customer ripe for murder. By now they'd learned more about the proportions and properties of laudanum, their failure with the two intervening attempts not discouraging them. Raking London's Smithfield sector at the hour of doom on this fateful evening, they encountered a youth sleeping on the stoop of a butcher shop. Head halted and nudged Bishop in his fat ribs. Bishop winked back heavily, significantly. They moved over towards the lad and shook him. The boy awakened with a start. He thought they were policemen.

They reassured him. They offered him employment. He said that his family was very poor and that he came from a tenement in Kent Street, Shoreditch, but he hadn't been near his mother and father for months because there wasn't enough at home to feed him. Bishop and Head encouraged the lad with visions of high wages. They lured him to Nova Scotia Gardens and drenched him with rum. It would warm him, they said, and so he drank heavily.

He slipped into a stupor. They grabbed him, tied him up, and threw him down the well. Within a few moments he was dead, but they left him there all night. The next day they disposed of him at St. Batholomew's Hospital. Intoxicated with the profits of their business, Bishop and Head now neglected details. They made the one infinitesimal mistake that is humanity's final automatic protection against all mass murderers.

They had great plans, these two, reaching to the destruction of the entire lay population of London (excepting, possibly, themselves) and selling the bodies to the medical. They thought of establishing a Dublin branch and an Australian branch in Sydney. They considered taking on employees and afterwards, probably, when further supplies were exhausted, killing off the men they dreamed would work for them. They engaged one fellow. They did not hire another.

On Thursday, November third, Bishop and Head were drinking in the Bell Tavern, Smithfield, when a fourteen-year-old lad named Carlo Ferrari, from London's Italian quarter, crept in. He

had a box of trained white mice; he would show them for a penny. They gave him a shilling and he amused them until an hour before midnight. Afterwards they brought him home with them.

At 1 A. M. they slugged him with a dose of laudanum that knocked him senseless. Then, deserting him, they visited a pub and had something a bit milder for themselves. Returning, an hour or so later, they carried him to the yard and were about to introduce him to the depths of the well when he regained consciousness.

Ferrari fought like a madman, bruising his body terribly, but Bishop and Head finally drowned him. They took off his clothes and buried them, leaving his naked corpse covered by a burlap bag on the floor of the garden wash house. Then they went to Old Street and had a cup of coffee. Later they came back and put the body in a trunk. Then they left for more coffee, returned home and went to bed.

The next day they solicited the hospitals for the sale of the Italian boy's body. Calling first at Mr. Tuson's Anatomical School in Windmill Street, they found that he was full up. Then they went to Mr. Carpue's School in Dean Street where they arranged to barter their commerce for eight guineas on the warranty of it being flesh of a firm and fresh quality. They promised to bring around the body early the next day.

Returning to the Fortune of War, they met a Resurrectionist named James May whom they'd frequently abetted in their forsaken trade of robbing graves. Bragging, they informed him of their more recent ventures. They told him about the Ferrari corpse. May toadied to them, talking his way into the scheme, telling them they were being cheated. May commanded higher prices at Guy's Hospital, he said. What they needed was an agent. By this time they were very drunk; so was May. May's argument sounded good. They hired him.

THE TRIO had difficulty getting a cab. They were known figures. No respectable hack driver would be seen hauling a Resurrectionist. They were refused cartage at the rack before Old Bailey and likewise in Bridge Street. Finally they found a carriage man in Farringdon Street who didn't recognize them. They drove to Nova Scotia Gardens and got the trunk with the body (first Head knocked out the teeth and sold them, gums attached, to Thomas Mills, a dentist) and took it to Guy's Hospital only to find that it wasn't wanted. They left it in charge of a porter.

Then they went to Mr. Grainger's School in Webb Street, Borough, and there they offered the body to Mr. Appleton, the medical gentleman to whom they'd sold Frances Pigburn. But Mr. Appleton had plenty of stock on hand. Then, the following day, they called at King's College and talked with a Mr. Partridge. They demanded twelve guineas of him, but the highest he would go was nine. This infuriated May, inasmuch as his commission was to be all obtained over nine. Bishop, nevertheless, promised delivery.

Again the porter Shields was called in to carry the body in a basket from Guy's to King's. When he arrived, May, drunk and angry, grabbed the hamper from him and dumped the body out on the floor.

William Hill, the hospital steward, saw its strange condition; its unbathed, unshrouded condition. The corpse appeared not to have been buried long, not, in fact, to have been buried at all.

Hill, his eyes wide with amazement, stared at the Ferrari boy's rigid limbs, his bent left arm, his hands turned towards his head and his fingers firmly clutched. The steward saw the bruises, the swollen

face and lips, the protruding tongue, the eyes open and blood-filled and starting out of the sockets. He saw a gash on the forehead from which blood had trickled onto the chest. Hill became aware that something was terrifyingly awry. He asked the boy's bearers to wait.

The steward sought out Mr. Partridge and blabbed his suspicions. Partridge came back with Hill and took a look for himself. Then, stalling, Partridge told Bishop and Head that the smallest thing he had was a fifty pound note and he'd have to send the steward out to break it.

Hill went out, not to change the note but to call the police. A patrol of bobbies rushed back with him. Bishop, Head and May were nabbed, still drunk, and dragged to Bow Street headquarters. There Bishop protested bleatingly, yelling out: "We're bloody body snatchers, that's all!"

The Nova Scotia Gardens rendezvous, given a frisking, yielded Ferrari's white mice, his gore-soaked trousers and cap, also the instrument with which his teeth had been gouged. More clothing, some male and some female, was found.

After the trial of the three ghouls, the house was let to a carnival-minded gentleman who asked in the public and collected fancy exhibition fees.

BURKE'S AND HARE'S final killing was that of the Widow Docherty. They murdered her in Burke's lodgings in Gibb's place and afterwards, for the time being, secreted her remains beneath the mattress of a guest room couch. But—and here Fate drew a hand in the murders' game—earlier the same day, Helen McDougal, not knowing of Bloody Burke's intimate little domestic deed, rented the stall to a panhandling pair named Gray.

They were a restless couple, these Grays, and they couldn't sleep that night. They complained to one another that there was something wrong with the straw ticking—there were bumps in it. In the morning they turned the mattress over and got a look at what was under the bed. They fled the house. White-faced, they passed the bewildered Helen McDougal about her morning chores.

The Grays ran for the police. Constable Ferguson was given the job of looking into the affair. But before he got there, Burke and Hare, in the company of a porter named McCulloch, came back, bundled up the corpse in a bag, and boldly, confidently, as though they were delivering a bushel of potatoes, strutted in broad daylight through the streets to urgeon's Square. They sold the corpse and returned to Helen McDougal's to find Constable Ferguson on hand.

"The Widow Docherty—where's she?" Ferguson had been belaboring Helen.

Unaware of what it was all about, she'd replied: "The widow? Why she checked out last night!"

Ferguson, ready to call the case off, anxious to ring in at the station house and get home to his supper, was on the point of laying the complaint to hot words between the Grays and their lodging keeper, chanced to question Burke as he entered.

"What became of the Widow Docherty?" the constable inquired in a bored, routine sort of a way.

And Burke, puffed up with the success of his evil deeds, boastful, insolent, and proud of Knox's money heavy in his trousers, answered with a sneer: "What business is it of yours, bobby? We threw her out this morning!"

The twelve hour difference in the two replies was the ounce necessary to tipple the balance of Burke's fate. It was the difference between light and dark, between night and day, between life and death. Constable Ferguson tore through the rambling, ramshackle hostelry to the room the Gray's had occupied. He looked

through the bedstraw. He discovered traces of blood, the dark red, almost black congealed gore of human blood. Hastening from the lodgings, he sounded his whistle and drummed his nightstick against the cobbles. The watch spun into action. Burke, Hare, Helen McDougal, and, afterwards, Maggie Laird were collared and jailed.

Maggie Laird, as was indicated by her suggestion of selling off Helen McDougal, had for months detested and been jealous of Burke's woman. Now Maggie testified for the crown. Hare, with no alternative left him now that Maggie had turned color, joined her. The couple warred, both laying blame on the other. Through some weird abortion of justice only Burke was convicted. Turned loose, the remaining three were set upon by a mob.

Their figures, along with that of Dr. Knox, were burned in effigy. The doctor, his practice ruined, was last heard of in London acting as spieler to a sideshow act of a tribe of Ojibway Indians.

Burke, in his condemned cell, confessed to sixteen murders in nine months. He complained of the damp and cold, of a balance due him and unpaid from Knox on the last body, of the treachery of his confederates He refused all offers of religious consolation, taking an interest only in some crank's theories of how to make a good living on the other side of the grave, the near side being already too familiar to him He expressed a wish for a decent suit.

During a violent rainstorm, at dawn on January 28, 1829, Burke was hanged. Later his body was cut down and forwarded to the anatomical school of a Dr. Munro. There, in a dissecting room, prior to being treated as Burke had himself helped others to be treated, the loathsome remains were looked upon with shuddering, macabre interest by the curious of Edinburgh.

BISHOP, HEAD, AND MAY were brought to book at Old Bailey in early December, 1831, Chief Justice Tindal, Mr. Justice Littledale, and Mr. Baron Vaughan presiding. His royal highness, the Duke of Sussex, attended.

Bishop admitted to Resurrectionist activities, claiming he got bodies from workhouses for the most part. With mock abhorrence he shrunk from the accusation of murder. Swearing that Carlo Ferrari's corpse had been taken from a tomb, he declined to name the cemetery.

Head claimed complete innocence. He swore he was never a Resurrectionist and never a killer. By the merest chance, he avowed glibly, he was with Bishop at the time of the Italian boy incident.

May confessed Resurrectionist activities, but would not admit trafficking in any corpses but those which had reached that state through natural means.

The jury was gone half an hour. All three were found guilty. The Court Recorder passed sentence thusly:

"The inhumanity and cruelty with which you have committed these crimes have spread a degree of horror through the metropolis and indeed, I may say, through the whole country. The sentence of the Court is that you, John Bishop, you Thomas Williams or Head, and you, James May, be taken from this bar, and each of you be hanged by the neck until each of you be dead, after which your bodies are to be given to the surgeons for dissection; and may the Lord God Almighty, the Father of all Mercies, have mercy on your miserable souls!"

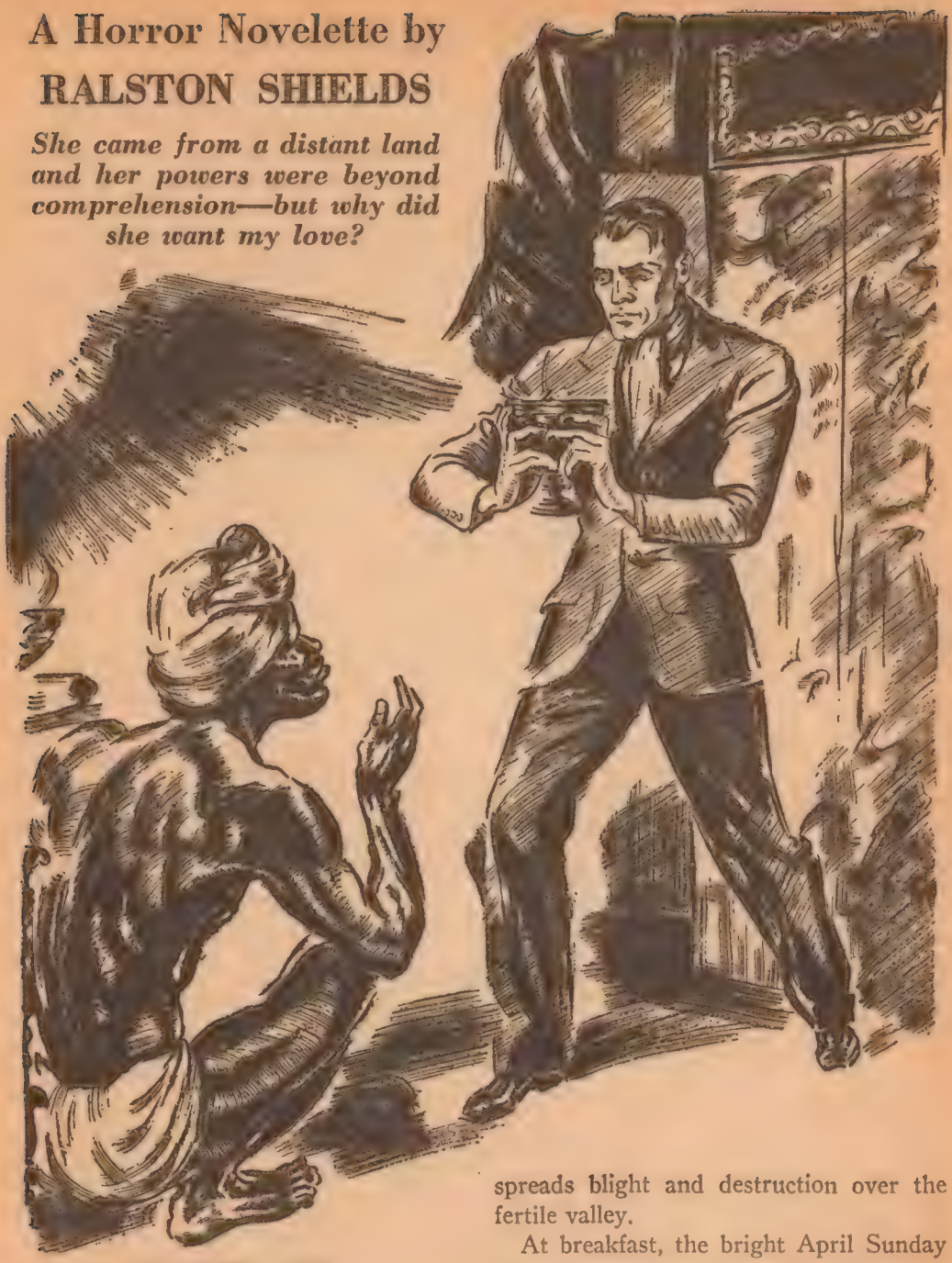
The next year a British parliament wrote the Anatomy Act. It made adequate provisions for the anatomical schools, allowing government supervised sale of bodies from charity hospitals, alms houses, insane institutions, and prisons. The law constituted it a felony to buy or receive a body from any other source.

Mistress of the Blood-Drinkers

Only one person could save my Nan from the agonies of the Watery Death—the beautiful and evil Naida Sadko. But her price was a kiss . . . a kiss that would bind me forever to serve her hell-born desires!

A Horror Novelette by
RALSTON SHIELDS

She came from a distant land and her powers were beyond comprehension—but why did she want my love?



CHAPTER ONE

The Watery Death

THE DEATH of my sister Alice was one of those tragedies that strike without warning—laying waste the happiness of human lives as a hot blast of wind from the desert spreads blight and destruction over the fertile valley.

At breakfast, the bright April Sunday when it happened, Alice was smiling and serene as always. I can remember a fancy that played in my thoughts that morning: if I were the judge of a beauty contest, I wondered, and I had to choose between my sister and Nan, my wife—to whom would I award the prize? Would Alice carry off the laurels, with her pale aristo-

cratic loveliness—or Nan, slight, almost boyish, with unruly red-golden curls and deep blue eyes? The question was a facer. I had admit to myself in the end that I couldn't reach a decision. . . .

That was in the morning. Before sunset, that day, Alice Coleman was no longer a vision of beauty. She lay gasping and writhing in agony, her body covered from head to foot with an eruption of ugly blisters, her eyes glazed over with the livid brightness of delirium. At the bedside were Nan and I, and also my grandfather, Grant Coleman—with whom we all made our home, in his fine old mansion on Nob Hill. Anxiously we watched the ministrations of Dr. Josiah Caulder, who had been summoned shortly after Alice was stricken.

No one had spoken for some minutes; the only sound in the room was my sister's agonized breathing. Then suddenly I was able to remain quiet no longer. "For God's sake doctor," I burst out, "what is it—what's wrong with her? With symptoms like that, surely you must be able to make some sort of a diagnosis!"

Dr. Caulder's kindly, middle-aged face was lined with concern as he turned to answer my question. "With symptoms like these," he said slowly, "I'd almost rather not make a diagnosis."

Something chilled within me, at the implication in his words. "What do you mean?"

"I'm afraid, Roger, that your sister shows all the effects of Vollmer's Disease."

"Vollmer's Disease?" I echoed. "What's that—I've never heard of such a thing!"

The doctor smiled rather grimly. "It would be amazing if you had, my boy. I'd lay a wager that nine-tenths of the registered physicians in San Francisco haven't heard of it either. Vollmer's Disease is one of the lesser known tropical infections. Years ago, when I was a young chap about your age, I accepted a surgeon's post at the Pasteur Memorial Hospital in Bombay. One of the older physicians there, a man by the name of Sackville, took a fancy to me, for some reason. A remarkable man, Sackville—the kind you don't often find teaching in medical schools; probably knew more about tropical fevers and infections than any other man alive at the time. He told me of some diseases that aren't even mentioned in the standard textbooks on pathology; they're too uncommon, they don't occur in regions where research has been carried on. This thing, this Vollmer's Disease, is one of the infections that belong in that class. . . ."

I FELT Nan's little hand stealing into mine. I could sense a presence in the room, the spectre of some unseen menace; and it was as if my wife had likewise felt the brush of invisible wings—as if she were seeking reassurance in the physical contact with my fingers.

"But—Dr. Caulder," Nan asked timidly, "what *is* this—this Vollmer's Disease? What causes it? How is it cured? And where on earth could Alice have caught such a thing, in a modern city like San Francisco?"

The physician shook his head. "I can give only one answer to all those questions—I don't know. The infection appears to be bacterial in nature; but the germ has never been isolated. It isn't certain how Vollmer's disease is transmitted; and there is no serum or specific cure known to medicine. The disease must simply be allowed to take its course, for better or worse. There aren't even any statistics available on mortality; the cases which have come to the notice of doctors have been too scattered, or too uncertain of diagnosis. I don't believe in raising false hopes, though; we have every reason to believe that the outcome is fatal more often than not. . . ."

He did not even lower his voice as he

spoke those grim words; Alice's delirium had progressed to the point where she was oblivious of all that took place in the room.

"About the only thing of which we *are* certain, where Vollmer's disease is concerned, is the diagnosis. These blister-like eruptions are unmistakable, both in appearance and in rapidity of development. . . . And as for your final question, Nan—about where Alice could have got such a thing in civilized America—your guess is as good as mine. Perhaps while she was doing some charity work in the Hindu or Filipino district, or in China-town she might have caught it. San Francisco is the nation's chief gateway to the Orient, of course; boats arrive here every day from cities that are the worst pest-holes in the world. . . ."

Now my grandfather spoke. He stood straight and firm, despite his seventy-eight years; but furrows of concern lined his fine old forehead. Shortly after my birth, my mother had died; and my father had survived her only a year. Both my sister and I had been taken into my grandfather's house; in a sense he had filled the place of father and mother in our lives. I could see what anguish this terrible thing that had befallen Alice was causing him.

"Alice and Roger have taken charge of the store, during the last year, you know," the old man said. "Roger in the manager's office, and Alice as chief buyer. You don't suppose she could have picked up this thing while she was examining some shipment of goods from the Orient, from Shanghai or Canton?"

The store to which my grandfather referred was Coleman's, Incorporated. He had started the business fifty-odd years ago as a small shop dealing in Eastern curiosities, and since that time it had grown to be the largest establishment of its kind in San Francisco: a veritable treasure-house of ebony furniture, brocade stiff with gold wires, bric-a-brac fashioned with the artistry of peoples who were urbane when the Western world was inhabited by savages. I had been raised in the business, so to speak, and I had learned to love the strange and beautiful wares which stocked its shelves and storerooms. I shuddered now, at the implication of my grandfather's question—it was ghastly to think that some fragile porcelain vase might have carried the seeds of pestilence across the wide Pacific.

Dr. Caulder was noncommittal about the possibility of such a thing; Vollmer's disease might or might not be transmitted through contact with physical objects. It was one of the questions to which science had no answer.

NO answer! That was the dreadful thing about the whole situation. In the ability of Dr. Josiah Caulder as a physician, I had the fullest trust and I felt sure he was doing his utmost. He was as much family friend as medical adviser; he had known my grandfather for years. The two men had been associated in many business ventures; and my grandfather's faith in his friend was evinced by the fact that Caulder was named as executor in his will. For my part, I could remember many a childish illness that had been treated by the elderly doctor and I always thought of him with affection. In this instance, I knew his concern over my sister was as much personal as professional.

It was ghastly to see him standing there, a man at the very forefront of his profession, helpless to do anything except administer slight palliative measures, in order to ease the worst of Alice's suffering. He gave her repeated injections of morphine; and I tried to make myself believe that they lessened her writhing and moaning.

But the weird eruption of blisters in-

creased and spread. At length the loathsome little sacs swelled to the bursting point, and the body of my sister, which had only so recently been a glorious thing to behold, was transformed to an oozing and hideous caricature. The fluid that burst from her skin had a nauseous odor, as if the decay of the grave were already setting in before her heart had stopped beating.

It was almost like a merciful relief when Alice died, shortly before midnight.

IN my life and Nan's, the tragedy left an ugly feeling of emptiness; Alice had had so much to live for—it all seemed so wrong, somehow, as if we had found a flaw in the very warp and texture of things. As for my grandfather, he was changed from a hale and hearty old gentleman to a pathetic, wornout figure on the brink of senility. His eyes were still bright, and his mind unclouded; but his walk was no longer so steadfast as it had been, and his hands seemed almost palsied. I had the feeling that he would not survive another shock as severe as this one. . . .

After the funeral, of course, the routine of life went on as always. The loss of my sister made my duties at the store somewhat heavier than they had been; in addition to my own administrative work, I had to supervise the buying which had been her specialty. I was almost glad of the increased pace, though; somehow there was less temptation to ponder and brood.

It was the duty of the buyer at Coleman's to interview a very strange assortment of human beings. The store was always a ready market for collectors and travelers who had acquired exotic objects of art, and wished to dispose of them at a good price. It now fell to my lot to examine what they had to offer, and bargain with them.

It was about two weeks after Alice's death that I had the opportunity to purchase a small copper bowl, exquisitely formed and inlaid with silver. It was offered by a young woman who introduced herself as Naida Sadko. Even among the procession of leather-faced *sahibs* and pudgy Turks and hobbling Chinese dowagers who passed in and out of my office, Miss Sadko was singled out by an arresting individuality.

As I tried to reach an agreement with her about a fair price for the little bowl, I was puzzled to decide what mixture of blood flowed in her veins. There seemed to be no doubt that her ancestry was at least partly Oriental. She had the slender, almost fragile frame and rose-white complexion of a well-born Kashmiri woman; her immense lustrous eyes had a slant, and her black coiled hair a dull sheen, that hinted of a Mongol strain; her narrow, hooked nose was like that of a princess on a Persian miniature. Perhaps one of her parents had been English or American; at least, she spoke the English language fluently, with an exquisite precision of accent.

It was not too difficult to come to terms on the purchase; and after the transaction was completed, I made a clean breast of my curiosity. "From what part of the world do you come, Miss Sadko?" I inquired. "Here at Coleman's we see many people from far-away countries, and I've made it a hobby of sorts to guess their nationality. Are you Persian, perhaps—or is your home in northern India?"

She smiled faintly at my question. "I *was* born in Asia," she murmured. "But my race is not very numerous; we mostly inhabit a remote and tiny state on the borders of Tibet and Afghanistan—the Kingdom of Nargit. My people are called the *Vashni* by the bulk of the population, who are Tartars and Afghans. . . ."

She paused, and I felt the gaze of her dark eyes as something almost tangible for a moment. "And now," she said, "let

me guess at your origins, in return, Mr. Coleman—it happens I have something the same interest as you in the peoples of the earth. . . . Let me see: you are blond, grey-eyed, and tall—inclined to be spare of figure. That speaks of ancestors from northern Europe, Saxon or English stock. And yet your complexion has a pleasant olive tinge that can't be all sun-tan—perhaps some distant ancestor. . . ." Suddenly she broke off her sentence in the middle with a kind of gasp.

Her even gaze intensified to a horror-stricken scrutiny that seemed to focus on the side of my neck. "Good God!" she whispered. "There—in the shadow of your jaw-bone—that spot of inflammation! It seems impossible in California, half-way around the world. Let me look closer, for Heaven's sake!"

I sat immobile with puzzlement while she left her chair, and crossed swiftly to my side. She looked more carefully at my throat; and her expression of concern only deepened in intensity at what she saw.

"*Kang Urdu*—the Watery Death! It's a disease that occurs sometimes in Nargit—horribly dangerous, and very painful! I—I'm afraid there can be no mistake; the first symptoms are unique. A patch of small blisters: you have them on your neck; but they will spread to cover your whole body. The few Western physicians who know of this dreadful infection call it Vollmer's Disease. . . ."

CHAPTER TWO

Spread of the Pestilence

WITH a motion almost involuntary, my hand went to the place under my jaw-bone. There was no doubt of it: the skin was roughened there, and it was strangely sore and burning. After a long moment, I managed to speak, in a voice that was curiously flat and unemotional. The wave of horror I felt was something too deep and profound to find outward expression.

"My sister died of Vollmer's disease, only two weeks ago," I said. "She had one of the finest doctors in the West. He identified the disease, but he could do nothing to save her."

Naida Sadko slowly shook her head. "The Watery Death is beyond the skill of the most celebrated physician. There is no medicine or surgery that will check its frightful course, once it has set in. . . ."

A wave of fear swept over me at those words; there was a grim finality about them that robbed me of further speech, of action, even of thought. I watched with stricken eyes as Miss Sadko stood there motionless for a full half minute. She seemed to be lost in thought, as if she were trying to make a decision.

Then, suddenly, she spoke again. "You must come with me, at once," she said. "I may be able to save you, if we lose no time. In Nargit, when their own doctors and healers fail them, the natives come to my people, the Vashni, for help. We inherit powers that are denied to other races—"

At that, I managed to find my voice again. "But you just said there's no help for this disease. . . ."

"No help in medicine or surgery," she countered, almost impatiently. "But powers exist that far transcend the learning of science. I know you are instinctively scornful of things you call psychic or supernatural, you Westerners—but there is no time to dwell on prejudice when a crisis is at hand. You said yourself that your sister died, despite all the efforts of a skilled physician. You are more fortunate, Roger Coleman—the offer of my help is freely made. I think you realize that you have nothing to lose by accepting it."

She seemed to be tremendously sure of herself, this strange woman from the

Orient. I still made some sort of objection; but she over-ruled me in the end, and I consented to go with her rather than try to get in touch with Dr. Caulder. Perhaps I was showing a childish lack of judgment, in placing my trust in a person who after all was a complete stranger to me, and who claimed to have knowledge which the whole tradition of my civilized background rejected as absurd. But that horrible day and night, during which we all stood by helpless as poor Alice lay dying in anguish, remained vivid in my memory; and I felt willing to snatch at any figment of hope, however fantastic....

IT took only a quarter hour to reach Naida Sadko's dwelling in a cab. She lived in one of the ancient mansions that still survive here and there in San Francisco—a vast and ornate old place situated on a commanding hilltop, the slopes of which were clothed in a tangle of greenery.

She ushered me into the house without ceremony, and led the way to an exotically furnished room on the second floor. She called a servant, a huge and hulking Mongol, and gave him some directions in a language I did not understand—had never heard spoken, for that matter. Then she made me strip to the waist, and recline on a richly upholstered couch in the center of the chamber.

I noticed with a shudder of dread that the eruption of blisters had already begun to break out here and there on my chest; and also I was aware of a horrible feverish lethargy that was beginning to steal over me. I watched in suspense as the hulking servant lit two tremendous candles, one of which he set at the foot, and the other at the head, of my couch. The wax must have been scented in some fashion, because the room began to swim with a mysterious spicy fragrance as the flames danced on the wicks. This perfume added strength to the lethargy which had seized me; and the effect was further intensified by the servant, who now produced a bamboo flute upon which he played an interminable hypnotic tune—the same monotonous phrase repeated again and again as if it would go on till the end of eternity.

I suppose ordinarily these bizarre trappings would have inspired very little save contempt in my thoughts; yet now, for some reason, I accepted them almost as a matter of course. Perhaps the disease from which I suffered had affected the critical centers of my brain; or I may have been influenced by some hypnotic power emanating from Naida Sadko herself, as she supervised the proceedings....

She turned to me, finally, as if she were about to begin her treatment. I watched, fascinated, as she slowly extended her hands to touch my body.

Even talking casually with her in my office, I had felt my attention drawn to Miss Sadko's hands. They were uncommonly long and supple—almost as if the bones in them were articulated like those of a snake. And they were never quiet, though her general demeanor was anything but nervous. It almost seemed that her fingers were endowed with a separate life of their own—that they instinctively coiled and uncoiled like the carnivorous tentacles of a sea-anemone, or an octopus.

At my office, Miss Sadko had worn gloves—strangely seamless coverings of some black clinging material like oiled silk. And now, curiously enough, her fingers were still sheathed by the same gleaming tissue, even though she was about to lay her hands on my body in her mystic rite of healing....

Her touch was so light, at first, that I could hardly feel its weight; and yet, despite the intervening gloves, I was aware of a strange thrill, something vibrant and electrical, at the contact. I can't explain the impression, even to myself—but I had

the sense that there was something *hungry* about that soft caress. Something ravenous and unspeakably vile, and yet strangely soothing, compelling, hypnotic.

It seemed that a murmuring voice was awakened somewhere in my being, an intuition that warned me against evil far more ghastly than the worst ravages of disease. For just an instant, I was tempted to push Naida Sadko from me, to face any danger rather than submit to her treatment. But the perfume from those candles was like a drug in my nostrils—the flute-playing of the servant caught my brain with insidious fetters of sound. And the pressure of the Oriental woman's hands was growing stronger, more compelling. I could feel her smoothly gloved fingers creep over my chest to my neck; and as I writhed at the sensation, one of her thumbs suddenly dug into the flesh beside my collar-bone with paralyzing effect.

Even while unconsciousness rose to cover me in a black tide, I realized what had happened: she had deliberately put pressure on a vital nerve, using her thumb after the manner of an expert in *jiu-jitsu* wrestling. . . . It was too late to struggle; another instant, and I was utterly swallowed up by the black void of oblivion.

WHEN I recovered my awareness, it was suddenly, in a flash, as if I had been in a pitch-black room, and someone had switched on an electric light.

Naida Sadko was still bending over me; plainly she had in some way released the pressure she had earlier put on my nerve. I knew this immediately; as I say, there was no intervening period of bewilderment between blankness and full consciousness. In fact, I was much more keenly in possession of my senses than before.

My first emotion was one of anger, that Miss Sadko had taken such violent measures without giving me the least warning of her intention. I swung to my feet, with some sort of oath on my lips. But the exclamation died unspoken, as I caught a glimpse of myself in a large mirror that stood by the couch.

What I saw seemed a blessed miracle: every trace of the loathsome eruption on my neck and chest had vanished—my skin was smooth and unblemished as always. All anger disappeared; instead I felt a flood of gratitude, mingled with sheer astonishment.

"But—it seems incredible!" I said. "I can't have been unconscious for more than a few minutes—and yet everything seems to have cleared away. I was feeling feverish and ill; and now I'm quite all right—never felt better in my life."

Naida Sadko looked at me with a strange smile playing about her soft lips. "I'm glad my treatment was effective," she murmured. "Perhaps, though, it was not quite so amazing as you seem to think. You have been unconscious for exactly twenty-four hours—a full day. During that time, various measures were applied, and ceremonies performed, which I am not permitted to describe to one of a foreign race. You were fortunate, my friend; the disease had not advanced far, and your case was easy to cure."

I stared at her, open-mouthed. "I was out for a whole day?" I asked. "It doesn't seem possible—I—I have no recollection of time passing. . . ."

For answer, she merely pointed to the massive candles which stood at either end of the couch; and I saw that they had burned eight inches or a foot lower than they had been. There could be no doubt of it; Naida Sadko was telling me the truth. . . .

In my delight and thankfulness for the miraculous cure she had performed, I quite forgot the strong impression of unnamed evil I had received during the beginning of the treatment. I now looked on the strange Asiatic as a benefactor, a

dear friend to whom I owed an unlimited debt of gratitude.

Of course, I realized that I was her debtor in a far more tangible way, as well; and before taking my departure, I tried to make clear as tactfully as possible that I wanted to pay for her services at the same rate which the most celebrated physician would have a right to expect.

But Naida Sadko waved my offer aside with a smile. "It is the custom of my people," she said, "to accept payment for their assistance in one form only. The powers of the Vashni are derived from a realm that has nothing to do with tangible things, like money; therefore we take no money in return for our help. To us, the only remuneration comes from the heart —in the golden coin of love. . . .

She came a step closer to me as she spoke, and her strange eyes held mine with an unfathomable look. And a realization came to me then with the sudden impact of a physical sensation, like the warmth of sunlight or the scent of some spotted, deep-throated lily. This woman was beautiful; she had a weird loveliness that was all her own, an exotic magnetism such as I had never before encountered.

"When chance brought me into your office," she murmured, "I knew at the first glimpse of you, that your love would be a thing I should treasure. I never dreamed, Roger, that Fate would so shortly give me a tangible claim upon it. . . ."

AS she spoke, her slender, black-gloved hand slid into mine; and again I felt an indescribable, electric thrill at her touch. A fierce wave of emotion swept over me; I was carried on the tide of feverish and unreasoning desire. Perhaps, too, there was a vague recurrence of foreboding; but I seemed to be hypnotized by some uncanny force, deadened to all sense of judgment, all will-power, all self-control.

"Take me in your arms, my lover," Naida whispered. "I shall teach you delights such as most mortals never dream."

Slowly, as if my movements were directed by a force outside myself, I drew her close to me; I felt the yielding of her slim thighs against my own; I brought my lips closer to the sweet scarlet flower that was her mouth. . . .

But that kiss was never to be consummated; I was suddenly chilled by the belated realization of a ghastly possibility. What brought the mental image at that precise, fatal moment, I shall never know. But I should have thought of it long ago— it was only too obvious a possibility.

Two weeks ago my sister Alice had died of a strange tropical disease whose characteristics were almost unknown. And yesterday I had come down with the same thing; which seemed to establish at least one fact beyond doubt. Vollmer's disease the dread Watery Death of Asia, was contageous—in the same way as small-pox, diphtheria, any of a number of ailments. I had caught the infection while standing at my sister's death-bed.

But I was not the only one who had been present when Alice had been stricken —Nan had been there, too, the same as I; and also my grandfather and Dr. Caulder. However, it was my wife who was chiefly in my thoughts now. I had not seen her for twenty-four hours; suppose, during that time. . . .

The hideous nightmare picture of Nan's fresh loveliness marred by that deadly eruption flashed sickeningly on the retina of my imagination.

All this was not logically thought out, as I must write it for the sake of clarity; as I say, it came to me in a single flicker of realization. All the enchantments of Naida's beauty were swept from my mind in an instant. Whatever this woman had done for me with her mystic art—even if she had saved my life—it was still Nan

who was the dearest thing in the world to me. As I freed myself from Naida's embrace, I could not repress a pang of self-loathing, that I had allowed her sultry loveliness to crowd thought of my wife from my brain for even a single moment.

"I'm sorry," I muttered incoherently, "but we—we can't do this. Nan—my wife. . . . I love her, you see; I shall always love her. I could never love anyone else, the way you mean. And I've got to hurry now. I've got to get back to her, and make sure—she's all right. . . ."

I did not even wait for a reply from Naida Sadko; I scarcely gave her a further glance, to see how she took my refusal of her affections. I turned, and almost literally bolted from the strange old mansion where the Oriental woman made her home.

Then I was hurrying down the hillside, through the forlorn tangle that had once been an elaborate garden; and once on the street, I waved frantically at the first taxicab that swung into view. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Kiss of the Hungry Hands

WHEN I reached home, my heart sank to see that Dr. Caulder's grey sedan was parked at the curb. Of course, the doctor was a frequent visitor at my grandfather's house; he might only have come on a social call. . . . .

But as I burst through the door, I was greeted by my grandfather alone; and the look in his eyes confirmed my worst forebodings. I did not even wait to hear the news from his lips; nor did I take time to explain to him why I had failed to return from work the day before.

I rushed into Nan's room; and the first thing I saw was Dr. Caulder's face, grey with despair. Then I crossed to the bed. . . .

God in Heaven—was it possible? Was this pitifully marred form the exquisite girl I had adored as my wife? Was this Nan, her face cruelly distorted with those ugly blisters, her breath quickened by fever, her little hands clawing at the covers? Only her beautiful copper-golden hair was the same—and the violet-blue of her eyes, despite their blank stare of delirium. . . .

I did not hesitate a moment; I knew there was no time to lose. With a single movement, I gathered Nan up in my arms; she was covered only by a sheet from the bed-clothing. My action was so precipitate that Dr. Caulder stood for a moment aghast; and before he could interfere, or say a word, I had rushed out of the room.

I did pause for a second to speak with my grandfather, before I left the house. "Don't ask me to explain," I said. "What I'm doing is the only hope for Nan. I don't know when I'll be back; but I'll get in touch with you as soon as there's anything to tell. . . ."

Then I had bolted out of the front door, without waiting for an answer. My heart went out to the tragic old man; but I knew that every minute was precious. My roadster luckily happened to be standing in the drive; I propped Nan gently in the seat beside me. And five minutes later, I was gunning the car up the winding, overgrown approach to Naida Sadko's hill-top mansion. . . .

If the dark-haired woman from the East was surprised to see me again so soon after I had rushed away with a half-incoherent apology, I could see no trace of it on her strangely lovely features. She led the way upstairs; and I tenderly laid my wife's pathetic half-conscious form on the same ceremonial couch where I had reposed earlier.

I watched in feverish suspense as Naida bent over the still form on the pallet. Was there a glimpse of evil triumph in her eyes,

at this turn of events? I could not be sure —my nerves were burning with such tension that I no longer felt sure of anything, not even my own sanity.

At last Naida Sadko had completed her examination, and turned to face me. "She is almost gone," she said. "Her case is much farther advanced than yours; and correspondingly more serious. But I believe I can save her."

"Then hurry, for God's sake," I begged hoarsely. "Another minute, and it may be too late. . . ."

Naida did not move; only the tips of her black-gloved fingers continued to writhe with uncanny motion. She gazed at me with a strange fixity. "I shall call back the wavering spirit to your wife's body, Roger Coleman," she whispered, "as I restored the hope of life to you also. But this time—we must agree on the payment in advance. We must reach an agreement on the fee for my service."

I made an impatient gesture. "My grandfather is one of the wealthiest men in San Francisco. If it's money you want, you've nothing to worry about—cure Nan, and you can name your own figure. . . .

BUT she shook her head, smiling faintly. "I told you earlier that I am not interested in money. I told you that I desired no remuneration except love—your love, my Roger. You were about to kiss me—and that act would have bound our souls together for all time, for my kiss is not like that of any woman you have known. From the moment a casual business transaction drew the threads of our lives together, I wanted you as I have never wanted anything in the world. I should have captured you for my own, save for one unforseen quantity—the strength of your love for your wife. Love is the strongest thing in the world, and even my powers were helpless against it. But now, this new act of Destiny has granted me the means to fulfill my longing, by the force of the very thing that was my greatest obstacle. . . .

"I will cure your wife, Roger. But you must kiss me first."

I stared at her in amazement; she was obviously quite serious in making this weird ultimatum. And mingled with my amazement was a prickling chill of fear: somehow I sensed that more was involved than the mere lust of a headstrong, perverse woman. I could not imagine what it was that Naida Sadko wanted of me; but more than ever I had the impression that she was a creature of evil, poisonous to the core of her being.

But then I caught a faint pathetic sound—a moan that came weakly from Nan's tortured lips. I hesitated no longer; I knew there was only one thing that mattered. "All right," I said, tonelessly, to Naida. "I'll do whatever you want."

Her long eyes narrowed with triumph; and her strange hands, in their gleaming encasement, writhed like black flames. Then the Asian woman came close to me, pressing her lithe form wantonly against mine, offering her red lips with a shameless gesture. In a sense I was thankful that Nan was delirious; she need not watch at least. . . .

I kissed Naida Sadko—God help me, I kissed her. There was never a less passionate kiss than that one—at least, none with less passion at the beginning. The strange spell the woman had cast upon me, earlier, had been utterly destroyed by the revelation of her true nature. Despite my indebtedness to her mystic art of healing, I had come to look upon her with something very like loathing. . . .

While her mouth was pressed against my own, Naida seemed to be twisting her hands together behind my back, outside the range of my vision. I wondered vaguely what she was doing; then I realized that she must be removing her gloves.

I felt her hands creep up over my shoulders; and then they were laid against the flesh of my neck, on either side. The palms and fingers were strangely cool—and they seemd to be moist as well. My skin crawled at the repitilian touch; but something else was awakened in me that overpowered revulsion—an emotion that had nothing to do with reason, or common-sense. It was a renewal, but a thousand times stronger, of the passion I had conquered before with the mental image of Nan in peril of her life. And this time, there was no stemming the fiery torrent of desire which Naida Sadko's strange hands had the power to evoke; it increased like a tumultuous river of flame, mingling with my blood, surging through every artery, penetrating each tiny blood-vessel so that my whole body quivered and throbbed. . . .

With tension that was quite automatic, I felt my arms tightening about Naida's slender waist; my mouth was glued to hers hungrily, where a moment before I had felt only distaste. My breathing became rapid and shallow with the stress of a passion like no earthly emotion I had ever imagined. I wanted that kiss to endure forever; I felt myself carried upward on a tide of immortal rapture. . . .

And then, abruptly, the spell was broken. The cool, moist hands that were laid on either side of my throat twisted spasmodically. I experienced a sharp stab of pain. . . .

Incredulous, I realized that Naida had dug fingernails sharp as the talons of a hawk into my flesh—fiercely, deliberately, cruelly. I could feel my own blood spurting—and while I was still held paralyzed with sheer horror, I became aware of a strange pulsation, a suction, *as if the palms and fingers of Naida Sadko's hands were absorbing the fresh scarlet that ran from the wounds she had made with her nails!*

I clamped my own hands about each of her wrists, finally, and by sheer force broke the grip she had on my throat. And then, with mingled astonishment and revulsion, I gazed on the members Naida Sadko had kept concealed with her odd gloves of black shining tissue.

I saw that each of her fingers was tipped with a pointed claw, hooked like those of a cat or a bird of prey. There was scarcely a resemblance to human finger-nails; but these harpy talons were not the most curious characteristic of her hands. The inner sides of all her fingers, as well as both palms were lined with strange pad-like swellings—with membranes that bore a greater resemblance to the internal surfaces of a human body, than to the normal epidermis. These membranes seemed to secrete their own moisture—which now was mingled with streaks and smears of blood from my lacerated throat.

MY GRIP relaxed; Naida drew her hands away, and they curled together for all the world like a pair of writhing mollusks. "My God," I whispered hoarsely. "You—you're nothing human. Who are you—what are you. . . ?"

Naida's enigmatic dark eyes never left mine for an instant. She made a sound like a low, musical laugh before she replied. "Human?" she whispered, finally. "What is 'human'? We of the Orient have larger definitions for terms, than you of the West. Asia is the mother from whose loins the known races of men sprang, to people the earth. You Occidentals think of the origin of humanity as something belonging far in the past—yet what reason is their to believe that the womb of Mother Asia has gone dry? Why should new forms not continue to appear—new variations on the old human pattern, refinements, improvements, elaborations?

"My race, the Vashni, came into being thousands of years ago; however, it is

very recent, compared to the older strains of humanity. As yet, it is not numerous. I have already told you that most of us remain in the hidden Kingdom of Nargit, on the Tibetan border, where because of our psychic powers we are worshipped by the natives as demons.

"Just as the orchid, with its elaborate and beautiful flower, has developed the ability to live as a parasite on other plants, to draw their grosser juices for its own benefit, so my people, the Vashni are able to draw nourishment, in the form of blood, from the inferior races of mankind. Thus our energies remain free to develop in psychic regions, without the slavery of tilling the soil, or hunting in the forest or fishing in the rivers."

Slowly she uncurled her fingers again, so the weird slimy lining of palms and digits was exposed once more to my gaze. "These hands, Roger, which you look on with such amazement and horror, are evolutionary developments of a biologic principle found in the most simple of animals, such as the star-fish and the sea-anemone. Every school-child knows of the Law of Osmosis—whereby fluids are drawn from one side of an organic membrane to another, through differences in specific gravity. It is through that natural law that the star-fish is able to absorb the juices of the mussel on which it feeds—just as we of the Vashni are able to absorb the blood of our human hosts."

As she spoke, Naida's miraculous dark eyes continued to hold mine with uncanny fixity. "In Nargit," she concluded, "the people think it an honor to be chosen by one of my race as a host, a donor of fresh blood. And you, too, Roger Coleman, whom I have selected as a source of nourishment in this foreign country, will learn to rejoice in your fate. You will come to revel in the pain inflicted by my nails, as they pierce your skin; you will love and cherish me as you could never love one of the insipid women of your own race."

"BY God—no!" I found my voice as she finished speaking; my protest was an explosion of incredulity, mingled nevertheless with sheer, unnerving horror. If it should be true—if such things could exist outside the disordered mind of a maniac. . . . But I preferred not even to let my thoughts speculate in that direction; it was easier to give my emotions release by speaking them aloud.

"You're insane, unbalanced," I accused Naida Sadko. "All this talk of unknown races and supernatural powers is sheer impossibility. You're either mad—or you're trying to play a cruel hoax of some kind. You're trying to get a hold on me, while I'm desperate over Nan, through your promises to save her life. . . ."

Something almost pitying came into Naida's expression as I spoke. "If I am mad," she asked softly, "if all these things are impossible—why is it that even now you long to take me in your arms again, my Roger? Why do you yearn even at this moment for the thirsty caress of my hands? Why is your soul reaching out for mine, even while your intellect tries to reject what is inevitable?"

I started to tell her that she lied; but even while the accusation was on my lips, I knew that she was speaking the truth. Once more, with renewed intensity, the flames of desire began to flicker over my soul. It was as if I had been poisoned by some subtle elixir when Naida's cruel nails had dug into my throat—and in the stress of its influence all protest or resistance was futile.

With a sudden motion, I took Naida Sadko in my arms for a second time; I writhed with fierce pleasure to feel her fingers oozing over the broken skin of my throat. She buried her face against me; and I heard her murmur, "Already,

my lover, you are mine—completely, irrevocably. It was fated so, from the moment my fingers tasted your blood. At that instant, your soul was given over to my keeping—and it shall be mine to the very end of eternity. . . !"

CHAPTER FOUR

The Road to Hell

I MUST record something now that will stand to my eternal shame. It was Naida, and not I, who first broke that unholy embrace; I was lost, utterly swept away, oblivious of all the time save the present moment. My fear for my wife, which only three minutes ago had been the dominant concern of my whole existing universe, was quite forgotten. She lay quivering and disregarded on the brocade-covered couch in the center of the room.

"Roger," Naida murmured, as she withdrew herself from my arms, "you forget that we have an emergency to deal with. Your Nan, to whom you believed yourself so intensely devoted, is in need of my attention. Our delight in each other must wait for the present. Dulu will show you to a room of your own, and I will join you there as soon as possible. . . ."

I was reluctant to leave Naida; but somehow it did not occur to me to question her decision. It seemed that her will had completely taken possession of my own; that some insidious witchery of her spirit had slid into my consciousness, robbing me of all self-determination. Like a child, I followed the brutish, sullen-faced Mongol servant from the room. . . .

That was the beginning of an existence like nothing commensurable with the human imagination. It seemed sometimes that I was in a heaven of sheer bliss. As Naida had said, I learned to revel in her blood-thirsty caresses; God alone knows what perverse and morbib instincts her weird power had awakened in my soul. But there were times when I could not banish the conviction that I was not in heaven, but rather on the road to deepest hell.

My body was covered with half-healed wounds, made by the sharp, claw-like nails of the Vashni woman; and naturally, I was weakened by the constant drain on my blood. And there was no doubt that my mind was being affected, as much as my body. It seemed that I was losing all sense of time, all sense of reality. I lost count of hours and days; during infrequent moments of complete mental clarity, I wondered if my periods of sleep did not sometimes extend a week or more.

Nan's treatment and cure, according to Naida, was far more difficult and complex than mine had been, because the disease had already advanced so far in her case. It was not matter to be taken care of in twenty-four hours; it might be weeks before she would recover completely. She must remain quiet, furthermore; the Oriental woman said she was keeping her in an hypnotic trance, and any disturbance might arouse her, with disastrous consequences. At that, I was almost relieved. Memories of the past, when I had lived only for the wholesome joy of Nan's love, had become unreal to me as dream-figments. And some hidden instinct prompted me to shut all reminders of honor and decency and sanity out of my thoughts. I wanted nothing to shatter the lotus-world in which I dwelled; and therefore I did not want to see my wife. . . .

My grandfather, and also Dr. Caulder, must be frantic with concern, I knew they could not possibly know where I had taken Nan. But I was curiously indifferent to the mental anguish they must be suffering, and I made no effort to communicate with them. My only thought now was of the hours I spent with the

weird Oriental siren, Naida Sadko, as her abject and utter slave.

What was my exact position, during those incredible days, in regard to the border-line between sanity and madness? That question is something I have never been able to decide with assurance. Only one thing is certain: as time went on, I was not regaining or rebuilding any degree of mental poise; my progress was all in the opposite direction. . . .

Any skepticism about Naida's supernatural powers vanished altogether; her calm assurance, and the tangible proofs I had witnessed, made all further doubt impossible. Nothing amazed me any longer; I was prepared for the most unholy miracles. I was scarcely even surprised, when I first began to notice a significant change in my own body—a metamorphosis that ordinarily would have filled me with complete stupefaction.

My finger-nails, I observed, were beginning to change—to thicken and to curve claw-like at the tips. And something was occurring to alter the skin on the palms of my hands, on the inside of my fingers. It was becoming suffused with tiny blood-vessels, strangely moist, showing a tendency to rise in pads. . . .

WHEN I showed the woman from Nargit what was happening, she smiled faintly. "At last," she said, "you have noticed the proof of my great love for you, Roger. I have decided that you shall become as I am—one of the superior strain of the Vashni. Instead of being merely my slave, to be kept as a source of nourishment, you shall become as I am. We two will go side by side, beings who are as gods compared with the herd of humanity. Like me you shall learn to absorb nourishment directly through the skin of your hands; we will hunt together, mingling with ordinary mortals unsuspected, and singling out those we desire for our own uses. . . .

"For some time, now, I have been performing certain veiled rites over you, while you slept; and as a result of these, the changes which you notice in your hands have taken place. Only a little while now, and the process will be complete. And then, I shall perform the awful ceremony whereby your whole being will be altered. You will lose all desire to take food through your mouth; you will learn what it is to feel hunger in your finger-tips."

How much longer it took for my finger-nails to develop into sharp hooked claws, as Naida predicted, and for those curious absorbent pads to form themselves on my palms, is something I shall never know exactly. I had lost all track of time, as I have already said; hour swam into hour, and day into day; and my life went on like that of a man in a trance. . . .

But the ghastly miracle was complete at last; my hands became almost exact replicas of Naida's own.

The time set for the ceremony which the Vashni woman had promised was midnight. She led the way to the same room where she had brought me to treat the Watery Death; once again the brutish servant, Dulu, lighted the immense ritual candles.

Naida Sadko drew herself up like the solemn priestess of some forbidden sacrament; I had never seen this remote, almost austere aspect of her personality before. Her words came like a chant when she spoke.

"Roger Coleman," she intoned, "you are about to receive one of the greatest honors that can accrue to a human being. You are about to shed ignorance and weakness from you; through my power you are about to become one with the sacred race of Vashni. . . ."

Even as she pronounced these words, she took up a small, razor-sharp dagger, and ran the point into her wrist, just above the black sheath-like glove she was wearing. Rich red blood spurted; and

this was caught in a small chalice by Dulu, who knelt before her.

"You will drink of my scarlet blood, Roger Coleman," Naida went on. "For the last time, nourishment will pass into your body through your lips. And then, by virtue of the powers of my people, your soul, the seat of all desire, will change in its very nature. Henceforth, you will feel the pangs of hunger in your hands, and your nails will thirst for human blood. . . .

"Drink, Roger Coleman and then pass through yonder portal"—she pointed to a closed door, which led to a room where I had never been before—"into the sacred shrine of Gata-Nema, the Secret God of the race of Vashni. Enter the dread presence alone, without any witness: and there make fitting sacrifice. A consecrated victim lies upon the altar: do not hesitate, but tear and rend the body of the offering, in the first ecstasy of newborn desire. Let your hands drink deep, as the spirit of a lesser being rises up to the glory of Gata-Nema."

I heard these words clearly and distinctly; but held as I was in the uncanny spell of Naida's personality, their full and monstrous significance failed to register upon my brain. I took the cup of blood from Dulu's immense hands; slowly I raised it to my mouth. . . .

For just an instant, some lingering spark of sanity warned me to hesitate; and I paused on the verge of that abominable act, inwardly struggling to control my thoughts, to return to the world of reason and common sense. Something warned me that if I tasted the hot red wine in that chalice, I would enter a world of horrors against which the things I had lived through already would be as nothing at all.

But then Naida spoke once more, gently and quietly. "Drink, Roger," she murmured.

And I drank; the rich salt warmth flooded over my tongue; I drained the last crimson drop. . . .

NOW Dulu went to the doorway which Naida had indicated; slowly he opened the panel of polished wood. I advanced like a sleep-walker; I passed through into the adjoining room. I heard the door softly close behind me, the click of a bolt sliding home.

The chamber in which I found myself was lofty and spacious. It was in semi-darkness; the only illumination came from a row of sputtering lamps at the far end. The flaring light caught the outlines of a huge idol on a stand, which was placed against the wall. The figure had some resemblance to the demon-effigies of Tibet; it was a magnificiently executed work of art. But even in my trancelike state, I could sense something profoundly evil about that sculpture—something obscene and horribly malevolent. . . .

Slowly I continued my advance across the room; and then I made out a long, low altar at the foot of the idol. Something white was stretched out there—a figure, a motionless human figure.

I reached the side of the altar; I gazed down with bewildered eyes at the recumbent shape. And then, a realization came over me that seared my whole being as if I had been suddenly drenched with a biting acid.

Nan—this was Nan, who lay pitiful and unconscious at the feet of Gata-Nema. *It was my wife, whom Naida Sadko intended me to offer up to her hideous idol!*

Nan was indescribably lovely, as she lay there, her slim body completely uncovered. All trace of the dread eruption of Vollmer's disease had vanished now. The curve of her thighs, the swelling mounds of her little breasts, the contour of her throat, were like outlines of a sculpture in sheerest alabaster. . . .

As I gazed at the girl whom I had all

but forgotten, under the perverse spell of the Vashni woman, it seemed that clouds and blinding vapors were being swept from my brain by a cold and bitter wind of reason.

I suddenly and completely realized the enormity of my betrayal; I felt the pain of remorse like a knife in my heart. Tenderly I knelt down, and caught my wife's hand in my own. "Nan," I choked, "forgive me. It's Roger, Nan—can't you hear me? Don't you hear, Nan?"

Feverishly I chafed her wrist in an effort to bring her back to consciousness. All else was forgotten; I wanted only to restore the light to the miraculous eyes of the girl I loved. I did not think of the salt sweetness that still lingered on my tongue, the savor of the abominable cup I had drunk at Naida's bidding. I was scarcely aware of an utterly new madness that was creeping over me, stealthily and mysteriously, like a shade from the deepest pit of hell.

But somehow, my hands travelled up Nan's arm from her wrist; they seemed to have become imbued with a life of their own, a carnivorous and insatiable vitality. By the time I realized what was happening, it was too late. I tried to give the command to my hands to draw away from Nan's body again; but the link between mind and action seemed to have broken in some mysterious way.

And then I sensed a phenomenon which makes me shudder to this day, when I think of it. My brain seemed actually to be dividing itself; I seemed to be developing an utterly new personality. And this new phase of my consciousness looked upon Nan not with remorse and compassion—but with hot and greedy desire! A red haze seemed to swim before my eyes; my fingers hooked and set like the talons of a bird of prey.

It seemed that the slimy pads which Naida's dread sorcery had created on my palms and fingers were actually thirsty. My transformed hands slid with horrible intent over Nan's shoulder, felt their way over the hollows of her neck—as if trying to select a spot where blood would burst through the delicate skin like the juices from a ripe fruit. And the monster who was crowding out Roger Coleman from my brain was gloating and panting with inhuman anticipation.

With the sane remnant of my mind, the residue of clear intelligence that still remained to me, I realized only too distinctly what the situation was. I knew that my new-born demon self would never be content with a small flow of blood, as Naida had been in feeding upon my body. I knew that my wicked, razor-sharp claws would dig into Nan's throat, tearing and rending the flesh until she was nothing but a horrible corpse. And I knew that once I had committed that beastly atrocity, no hope would remain for me on earth or in heaven. Henceforth until the end of all eternity, I would be condemned to the torments of howling, gibbering madness. . . .

Yet I was helpless to check the will of the thing Naida Sadko's blood had evoked in my consciousness. I could only observe—as if my real self were a ghost, a mere impotent wraith.

My fingers pressed harder on Nan's throat; already the blood was spurting slightly as the needle-points of my nails pressed into the velvet smoothness of her skin.

And then, while I hovered on the very brink of damnation, Nan opened her deep blue eyes, and stared at me in bewilderment. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

The Crimson Hunger

"ROGER," she faltered. "Where—what. . . ? Where have you taken me, Roger?"

I uttered no sound, save a beast-like snarl that bubbled deep in my throat. Nan must have seen the madness that blazed in my eyes, then: because she suddenly recoiled from my grip, and drew herself together into a crouching position.

I was only the more frantic with my ghoulish mania, at this show of resistance; I grabbed for her like a striking panther. But Nan had always been quick and agile; uttering a low moan of sheer panic, she leaped to her feet, and darted across the room.

I lunged after her; in the opposite corner I pinned her against the wall. But once more she broke from my grip, this time bearing the cruel mark of five claws on the sheer skin of her back.

As she crossed the room again, whimpering with fear, she knocked against a tall Oriental screen that was one of the few furnishings of Naida's *sanctum sanctorum*. The screen crashed to the floor—and behind it was revealed the lurking figure of a man!

I saw that he was armed; and at the same instant, I identified him. God in Heaven! It was Dr. Josiah Caulder!

The utter unexpectedness of this discovery brought me up short like a physical blow. But my stupefaction held me motionless for no more than a moment, because the flames of maniac blood-lust still rage in my consciousness, undiminished. Once my fevered brain had accepted the doctor's presence in that room, it made no attempt to go further and explain it. I was intent on one thing—and one thing only.

And one victim, furthermore, was as good as another. Now that the discovery of Dr. Caulder had drawn my attention away from Nan, it was upon him that I prepared, beastlike, to spring.

He was armed, as I have already said; he levelled a blunt automatic at me, while

(Continued on page 106)

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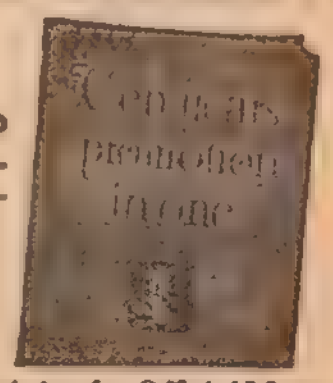

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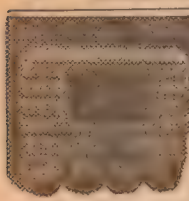

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(Continued from page 105)

in his eyes an ugly light glinted which I had never seen there before. I was beyond the fear of bullets, however—my reactions were no longer those of a sane man.

As I leaped, Caulder fired; and I felt a sharp searing pain in my thigh. The bullet had merely grazed my flesh, though; it was not enough to stop me—and the doctor never had a chance to fire a second time. He staggered backward under my onslaught; tripped and went down on his back. His gun fell to the floor.

He was a man of more than average strength; but the fury of my obsession was such that he seemed like a rag in my hands. I ripped and tore at his flesh with the talons that had grown on my fingers; with horrible satisfaction I felt his hot blood slippery on my palm. I screamed with mad, triumphant laughter, peal after demented peal, as I gouged at his throat, and the scarlet cascade of his jugular vein shot forth like a fountain.

But then my hellish ecstasy was cut short; the door had burst open, I realized; bright electric lights had been switched on. Naida Sadko and her brute of a servant, Dulu, rushed into the room. At a command from the Oriental woman, the hulking Mongol advanced toward me.

I was more than ready for him; the same wild recklessness that had launched me against Dr. Caulder's bullet now sent me hurtling against this new attacker. But a struggle with the powerful Asiatic proved to be a far different matter from the one I had just concluded.

Dulu must have been nearly seven feet tall; and he was thewed and muscled in proportion. I'm no weakling, by any means; but I felt like a mere child in the grip of that ugly, yellow-skinned giant. He had grabbed me about the throat; and he was throttling the breath of life from my body, as Naida, transformed now

into a raging harpy, screamed at him to urge him on.

The stress of blood-madness, which had impelled me to the fray, was beginning to leave me now. I was no longer a crazy monster, but a man fighting for his very life. My hands were still armed with claws, by virtue of the Vashni woman's infernal art—and those claws proved to be my salvation. As I writhed and twisted like a leopard in the grasp of a huge bear, my fingers found what they were seeking—the eyes of my attacker.

DULU leaped back, with a hoarse scream—his face horrible with the blood and fluids that were streaming from his eye-sockets. He sank in a moaning, helpless heap on the floor. He had released my throat from his deadly grip just in time; already the flares and fiery flowers that precede darkness were floating before my vision. I sank to a half-kneeling position, gasping and retching in agony.

Naida Sadko herself leaped at me now; she had drawn a long dagger, and she raised the blade to plunge it into my body.

I tried to fend her off, but my fight with Dulu had left me only half-conscious; my strength was all drained away.

In another instant, the dagger would have found my heart; but then a single shot crashed in the room. Naida's evilly intent face relaxed into a mask of uncanny blankness; she dropped the dagger and toppled forward, and lay still on the floor.

With eyes that were misting over, I saw what had happened. Brave, plucky little Nan had picked up the gun that Dr. Caulder had dropped. It was her single thought to save my life—even though I had pursued her with murderous intent only a few minutes past. She had sent that bullet which closed Naida's abomin-

(Continued on page 108)

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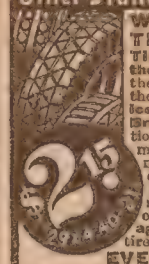

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29x5.00-19	2.65	1.25
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6.25-17	2.90	1.35
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.35
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.35
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.35
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.35
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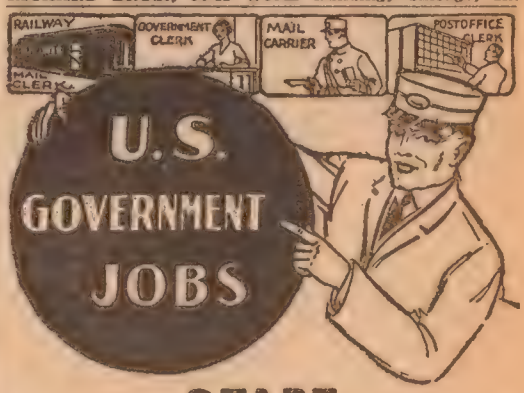

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(Continued from page 107)

able career forever; and now she was advancing toward me, all tenderness and compassion. . . .

As she reached my side, I tried to speak; I wanted to tell her that somehow, in the course of the wild struggle I had just been through, my crazed impulse to kill had faded away. I wanted to tell her that my only emotions now were gratitude to her, and the same profound, tender love that had been the seal of our marriage from the beginning.

But the words didn't come, for some reason; and it proved that they were unnecessary. By some deep intuition, Nan sensed that I was sane and normal again; we held each other close, and shared an unspoken promise of future happiness.

NOTHING remains to be told of that horrible chapter in our lives save the details of the gruesome plot with which Dr. Josiah Caulder sought to wreck our happiness.

It was Dr. Caulder, of course, who was responsible for the whole affair. The Mongolian servant, Dulu, whom I had blinded with my horribly distorted fingernails, later revealed every subtlety of the deception, in hopes of gaining some clemency from the law for his part in it. He proved to be of far more acute intellect than his brutish face indicated; and Caulder and Naida had taken him fully into their confidence. . . .

Naida Sadko was actually the daughter of the middle-aged physician. Her mother had been a Hindu, whom Caulder had married during a stay in India, and the girl had grown up in Bombay. No one, not even my grandfather, knew of her existence; and so when she arrived from the Orient she proved to be the ideal accomplice to carry out her father's fiendish hoax.

The motive for the whole thing was

nothing more nor less than greed for wealth. Caulder had recently lost heavily in private speculation; and he resolved to recoup his losses by gaining control of the fortune of his oldest friend, Grant Coleman. For years, his apparent love for my grandfather had masked a consuming envy of his financial good fortune, and when my grandfather named him as executor of his will Caulder, instead of regarding the designation as a sacred trust, schemed to use it as the entering wedge for his devilish plan.

His general aims were the following: first of all, to kill my sister Alice, thus eliminating her as an heiress. Also, he wanted to get rid of my wife, Nan. As for me, he preferred to keep me alive—because my grandfather's will provided that the estate should go to various institutions, in case no heirs were living. But if I were alive, I would be sole heir to everything. And if I were at the same time incompetent, a hopeless lunatic, then Caulder, as executor, would have control of the estate as long as I lived.

The mysterious malady, Vollmer's Disease, was a pure fiction which he invented to make the death of Alice as horrible as possible. He infected her with a variety of Mexican chicken-pox, that was comparatively harmless, but that produced an alarming eruption in a short time. This he was easily able to do by putting the virus on her tooth-brush; he later used the same method to inoculate both Nan and myself. Under ordinary circumstances, the fever and blistery eruption would have disappeared in a day or less; but under the pretense of giving Alice injections to ease her pain, he had calmly poisoned her under our very eyes!

His aim in building up all this horror, of course, was to start the subtle process of undermining my sanity, through a combination of incredible and gruesome

(Continued on page 110)

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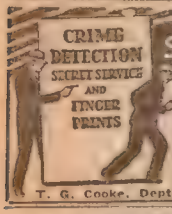

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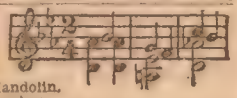

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(Continued from page 109)

events in which I would be hopelessly entangled. He also hoped to shatter my aged grandfather's health, through the catastrophe to Alice. He counted on the cruel blow to follow, when Grant Coleman should learn of Nan's death and see me reduced to drooling idiocy, as sufficient to kill him outright, or in any case to shorten his expectancy of life to a brief period. . . .

The weird pads and claws on Naida's hands were another deception. He raised the flesh on her palms by injecting paraffin under the skin—a common technique in plastic surgery. This could be removed later; and Naida was willing to undergo the temporary disfigurement for the sake of the fortune she and her father hoped to obtain. As for her cruel talons, they were artificial caps cemented to her nails. The points were grooved and filled with stupefying and aphrodisiac drugs; once she had dug them into my flesh, whole centers of my brain were deadened. . . .

DURING my sojourn in the ancient mansion on the hilltop, I was kept constantly under the influence of scopolamine, and other chemicals that undermine the will-power and the sense of time.

Caulder came to the house at night, and while I was lying in drugged slumber, bit by bit injected paraffin under my palms to make them resemble Naida's. As for my pantherish claws, they were not artificial; instead the doctor applied caustic to the roots of my finger-nails, which made the natural growth emerge thickened and temporarily deformed.

The final attack of murderous bloodlust, in the throes of which I was intended to murder poor Nan like a ravening beast of prey, was artificially produced like everything else. Even when smoked in the form of *marijuana* cigarettes, the alkaloid of *cannabis sativa* sometimes produces murderous passions in its users; but this

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horrible effect can be intensified by administering the drug in the form of a tincture. The cup into which Naida's blood spurted already contained a quantity of this tincture of *cannabis;* of course it was that and not the blood which later produced my blood-thirsty dementia.

Dr. Caulder's conspiracy was almost fool-proof. Once I had killed Nan, the doctor intended simply to leave me at some random spot on the outskirts of the city. There I would be found wandering in a state of incoherent lunacy; and this would cause little surprise, because shortly afterward the mutilated body of Nan would be found in the same vicinity. The doctor even planned to induce decomposition in the corpse by artificial means so she would appear to have been dead for some time. So far as anyone would know, I had been last seen running from my grandfather's house with my desperately sick wife in my arms. It would be a quite natural assumption that grief over my sister's recent death had weakened my mind; and that something had snapped when I discovered my wife to be ill with the same horrible malady.

Even to this day, I shudder to think that the whole diabolical conspiracy fell short of success through the merest whim of chance. Undoubtedly, Nan's unconsciousness, as she lay on the altar in the sanctum of Gata-Nema, was produced

(Continued on page 112)

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(Continued from page 111)

through *jui-jitsu* pressure on a nerve—the same method Naida had used to knock me out during her fake treatment of the spurious disease. She would never, at the crucial moment, have regained her senses, and upset the whole scheme by her resistance to my attack—if I had not chanced to relieve the deadening nerve-pressure while exploring her naked body with my demented fingers.

Even now I shudder when I realize how desperately close I was to the ultimate disaster. Nan has acquired a new sort of preciousness in my eyes; we are bound together by a love such as most people never understand, nor even dream of. We have been through the shadows together; and sunlight has taken on a new meaning in our lives.

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